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14. ABSTRACT

When government officials consider how the United States might intervene in crisis situations throughout the world, the likelihood of combat and the probable magnitude of U.S. casualties invariably dominate the deliberations. This is a reflection of what is now an article of faith in political circles: that the American public will no longer accept casualties in U.S. military operations and that casualties inexorably lead to irresistible calls for the withdrawal of U.S. forces. However, this thinking is not confined to political decision makers. The Department of Defense (DOD) has institutionalized the political imperative of casualty minimization in various doctrinal publications. More significantly, the desire to minimize U.S. military casualties has achieved an unprecedented significance in the formulation of military strategy in recent conflicts. These trends appear to be gaining momentum, especially within the United States Air Force. However, America's casualty sensitivity is misunderstood. The conventional wisdom that the American public will not tolerate casualties is inaccurate. America's support of military operations involving casualties is dependent on several factors, some more critical than casualties. My research indicates that the public will support operations when the interests at stake seem commensurate with the costs. Additional factors which influence public support are political consensus, actual progress of the conflict, and changing expectations. Furthermore, America's casualty sensitivity is not confined to the U.S. public. America's casualty sensitivity is the combined sensitivities of the public, the military, and the government. Despite its inaccuracy, the conventional wisdom regarding America's casualty sensitivity has found its way into military doctrine and strategy. The influence of America's perceived sensitivity to casualties is evident in America's conduct of limited wars in Korea, Vietnam and Desert Storm. In each of these conflicts policy makers turned to air power as a means to reduce casualties and preserve public support for the wars. As a result of the swiftness and relative bloodlessness of Desert Storm, policy makers have begun to view air power as a low risk alternative to surface forces. However, the performance of air power in recent military operations may have established an unrealistic expectation for future conflict. Finally, while force preservation has a necessary place in military doctrine and strategy, the reasons for its inclusion should be based on a complete understanding of the casualty limitation issue. The military should exercise caution to ensure that force preservation is kept in perspective and does not breed timidity in our forces. Armed with a complete understanding of the casualty sensitivity issue military strategists can effectively craft strategy and advise policy makers, clearly stating the most appropriate strategies to achieve military objectives while tacitly considering the casualty sensitivity issue. Despite its inaccuracy, the conventional wisdom regarding America's casualty sensitivity has found its way into military doctrine and strategy. The influence of America's perceived sensitivity to casualties is evident in America's conduct of limited wars in Korea, Vietnam and Desert Storm. In each of these conflicts policy makers turned to air power as a means to reduce casualties and preserve public support for the wars. As a result of the swiftness and relative bloodlessness of Desert Storm, policy makers have begun to view air power as a low risk alternative to surface forces. However, the performance of air power in recent military operations may have established an unrealistic expectation for future conflict. Finally, while force preservation has a necessary place in military doctrine and strategy, the reasons for its inclusion should be based on a complete

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**THE INFLUENCE OF AMERICA'S CASUALTY SENSITIVITY
ON
MILITARY STRATEGY AND DOCTRINE**

**BY
TROY E. DEVINE
MAJOR, USAF**

**A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF
THE SCHOOL OF ADVANCED AIRPOWER STUDIES
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Disclaimer

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author. They do not reflect the official position of the US Government, Department of Defense, the United States Air Force, or Air University.

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Abstract

When government officials consider how the United States might intervene in crisis situations throughout the world, the likelihood of combat and the probable magnitude of U.S. casualties invariably dominate the deliberations. This is a reflection of what is now an article of faith in political circles: that the American public will no longer accept casualties in U.S. military operations and that casualties inexorably lead to irresistible calls for the withdrawal of U.S. forces. However, this thinking is not confined to political decision makers. The Department of Defense (DOD) has institutionalized the political imperative of casualty minimization in various doctrinal publications. More significantly, the desire to minimize U.S. military casualties has achieved an unprecedented significance in the formulation of military strategy in recent conflicts. These trends appear to be gaining momentum, especially within the United States Air Force.

However, America's casualty sensitivity is misunderstood. The conventional wisdom that the American public will not tolerate casualties is inaccurate. America's support of military operations involving casualties is dependent on several factors, some more critical than casualties. My research indicates that the public will support operations when the interests at stake seem commensurate with the costs. Additional factors which influence public support are political consensus, actual progress of the conflict, and changing expectations. Furthermore, America's casualty sensitivity is not confined to the U.S. public. America's casualty sensitivity is the combined sensitivities of the public, the military, and the government.

Despite its inaccuracy, the conventional wisdom regarding America's casualty sensitivity has found its way into military doctrine and strategy. The influence of America's perceived sensitivity to casualties is evident in America's conduct of limited wars in Korea, Vietnam and Desert Storm. In each of these conflicts policy makers turned to air power as a means to reduce casualties and preserve public support for the wars. As a result of the swiftness and relative bloodlessness of Desert Storm, policy makers have begun to view air power as a low risk alternative to surface forces. However, the performance of air power in recent military operations may have established an unrealistic expectation for future conflict.

Finally, while force preservation has a necessary place in military doctrine and strategy, the reasons for its inclusion should be based on a complete understanding of the casualty limitation issue. The military should exercise caution to ensure that force preservation is kept in perspective and does not breed timidity in our forces. Armed with a complete understanding of the casualty sensitivity issue military strategists can effectively craft strategy and advise policy makers, clearly stating the most appropriate strategies to achieve military objectives while tacitly considering the casualty sensitivity issue.

Contents

	<i>Page</i>
DISCLAIMER.....	II
ABOUT THE AUTHOR.....	III
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	IV
ABSTRACT.....	V
INTRODUCTION.....	9
Overview.....	10
AMERICA’S SENSITIVITY TO U.S. MILITARY CASUALTIES.....	14
Introduction.....	14
U.S. Public Sensitivity to U.S. Military Casualties	15
Political Leaders’ Sensitivity to Casualties.....	18
Military Sensitivity to Casualties.....	20
Conclusion	23
CASUALTY SENSITIVITY AND STRATEGY IN LIMITED WAR	27
Introduction.....	27
1945-1950	28
The Korean War.....	29
The Vietnam Conflict	33
The Vietnam Syndrome	36
Desert Storm	37
Conclusion	40
THE IMPLICATIONS OF CASUALTY SENSITIVITY FOR THE USAF	44
Introduction.....	44
An Era “Free Of Compelling Threats”.....	45
Technological Solutions.....	49
Buying Into The Concept of Low Risk Warfare	52
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	57
The Nature of America’s Casualty Sensitivity.....	57
Casualty Sensitivity and Air Strategy in Limited War.....	59
The Strategic Environment and Casualty Sensitivity.....	60

Recommendations.....	60
BIBLIOGRAPHY	63

Chapter 1

Introduction

The peculiarity of foreign policymaking in the post-cold war world, is the assumption that while everybody says that it is a dangerous world, there is an almost total unwillingness to accept costs, risks, and sacrifices... I am wondering if it is realistic for a superpower, however much it cherishes the life of every single individual, to conduct an effective foreign policy where the underlying criterion is dangerous.

Rep. Tom Lantos
Chairman of House Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs¹

When government officials consider how the United States might intervene in crisis situations overseas, the likelihood of combat and the probable magnitude of U.S. casualties invariably dominate the deliberations.² This is a reflection of what is now an article of faith in political circles, that the American public will no longer accept casualties in U.S. military operations and that casualties inexorably lead to irresistible calls for the withdrawal of U.S. forces.³ However, this thinking is not confined to political decision makers. The Department of Defense (DOD) has institutionalized the political imperative of casualty minimization in various doctrinal publications. More significantly, the desire to minimize U.S. military casualties has achieved an unprecedented significance in the formulation of military strategy in recent conflicts. These trends appear to be gaining momentum, especially within the United States Air Force.

In the recently published document *Global Engagement: A Vision for the 21st Century Air Force*,⁴ the Air Force contends that in the future it will become the “strategic instrument of choice” for U.S. leaders because of its ability to make war — or influence peace — decisively, while putting as few Americans in harm’s way as possible.⁵ In defense of the document, General Ronald R. Fogleman, Air Force Chief of Staff, stated that

“We need to be looking to the future [and] . . . recognize the realities of what the battle-field is going to be like. And I have to tell you that we as senior leaders in our military, should not take the potential for casualties lightly.”⁶

Far from being taken lightly, the concern over U.S. military casualties is now viewed as the defining limitation in the exercise of the United States’ tremendous military power. Edward Luttwak, a Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, views this trend as a threat to our superpower status. According to Luttwak, a historical precondition of “great” power status was “a readiness to use force whenever it was advantageous to do so and an acceptance of the resulting combat casualties with equanimity, as long as the number was not disproportionate.”⁷ Increasingly, the appropriate number of U.S. military casualties deemed acceptable by U.S. political leaders in military intervention efforts is zero.⁸ This fact is not lost on U.S. military strategists as they develop possible courses of action for the application of our national military power, nor is it lost on our potential adversaries.

In light of the widely recognized significance of the casualty sensitivity issue, it is odd that in doctrine and policy statements, ill-supported aphorisms appear to serve as the main foundation of military thinking on the topic. Unfortunately, the simplistic assertion that “the American public will not tolerate long and costly conflicts” is not only imprecise, it overshadows more subtle but substantive aspects of the issue. These subtleties can have an important effect on the application of military power and direction of DOD strategic thinking. The purpose of this thesis is to determine what effect the perceived intolerance to U.S. military casualties is having on military strategy and thinking. This paper will explore this issue in an effort to clarify and focus our institutional thinking on this subject.

Overview

The key to understanding the dynamics of the casualty sensitivity issue rests in determining which elements of U.S. society are sensitive to U.S. military casualties, what factors influence that sensitivity, and to what extent that sensitivity is influencing military strategy. Chapter 2 will explore these questions, focusing on the U.S. public, political

leaders, and military leaders. By exploring the sensitivity within each of these groups and the interaction among them, the dynamics and complexity of the casualty sensitivity issue can be more fully appreciated. While each of these elements of society has demonstrated a sensitivity to casualties, the nature of our democratic system ensures that the U.S. public has a significant impact on the political decision to use force. However, in contrast to the conventional wisdom that the public simply will not tolerate casualties, my research supports the findings of a recent RAND study which suggests that domestic support for military operations reflects a sensible weighing of ends and means.⁹ According to Eric Larson, the author of the study, the key variables in the equations are: the perceived benefits of the operation achieving its objectives, the prospect of success, the expected and actual cost, and finally the degree of consensus among political leaders. Unfortunately, the subtleties of this calculus appear to be absent from the understanding of this issue among political and military leaders.

Statesmen and military leaders have different reasons for concern over battle losses. Statesmen must consider the impact of casualties on domestic support for the war and ultimately on their political viability.¹⁰ Military leaders must consider not only the political acceptability of a particular course of action, but also tactical and operational imperatives to preserve the fighting strength of deployed forces. Although force preservation is not a new goal for the U.S. military, the degree of emphasis it now receives in doctrinal publications is unprecedented. The perception that the U.S. public is intolerant to U.S. military casualties and will demand warfare with low friendly losses is evident in documents ranging from the *National Security Strategy of Enlargement and Engagement* to service level doctrine. As these ideas become institutionalized in U.S. military thinking they will undoubtedly influence future military strategy.

Having established the foundations of the casualty sensitivity issue in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 will highlight the effects of America's sensitivity by examining its impact on military strategy in three limited wars. The chapter will focus on how sensitivity to U.S. military casualties has influenced the Air Force's institutional thinking, and what influence this thinking had on the conduct of air operations in Korea, Vietnam and Desert Storm. A review of these conflicts underscores the influence that the interaction of pub-

lic, political, and military pressures to minimize U.S. casualties has on military strategy, particularly air strategy.

Even before the Air Force gained independence as a separate service, airmen have attempted to distinguish air power from the other services by emphasizing the airplane's ability to bypass fielded forces and strike the enemy's most vital targets. Air power advocates pointed to this unique capability to support the assertion that air power could deliver swift victories at low cost in war. During the cold war this theory was put to the test. Political leaders turned to air power, believing it could expedite the termination of the Korean and Vietnam conflicts while reducing U.S. military casualties and shoring up domestic support for the wars. Unfortunately, air power's contribution in securing swift, low cost conflict termination is debatable in both of these long and bloody conflicts. However, there is little debate about the influence that casualty sensitivity had on strategy development and execution in the Gulf War. This conflict also provides an excellent example of how air power contributed to securing a truly swift and relatively bloodless victory.

As a result of the impressive performance of air power in the Gulf War there is a growing tendency to turn to air power as the option of choice for intervention in most conflicts. Air power seems to provide a solution to the political dilemma of using military force in an unpopular conflict. In fact, the air war in the Gulf War has caused what Eliot Cohen refers to as an "ornithological miracle." Cohen notes that traditional doves in the media and Congress are turning hawkish in their support for intervention in places like Bosnia because of the perception that air power is a low-risk alternative to the employment of ground forces.¹¹

Chapter 4 will focus on the implications of the evidence presented in the preceding chapters for the Department of Defense and specifically the USAF. The USAF has touted itself as the "weapon of choice" in the strategic environment of tomorrow. Evidence indicates that the service will continue to use sensitivity about U.S. military casualties to its advantage in weapons procurement and in the ongoing struggles over roles and missions. Yet, beyond the short term advantages lie potential problems. When it is virtually universally accepted that "the low casualties experienced in Desert Storm estab-

lished a norm that the U.S. military will have to meet in future wars,”¹² we may be establishing unrealistic standards for future conflicts. This concern was amplified in 1995 by Georgia Senator Sam Nunn when he lamented, “So I hope we don’t set up expectations, such high hurdles for ourselves, that we begin to gradually become impotent in our ability to respond because of being measured against those expectations.”¹³ Chapter 4 will probe the extent to which casualty minimization within the Air Force is reflected in our institutional thinking, force structure and long range strategies.

Taken in whole, this paper will address the casualty sensitivity issue in depth and explore the extent of its impact on military strategy, particularly in the USAF. The findings of this study should help both Air Force and political leaders understand more fully the constraints which casualty sensitivity does and does not impose on the employment of military power in general, and air power in particular.

Notes

1. Rep. Lantos was the Chairman of the House Of Representatives, Subcommittee on International Security, International Organizations and Human Rights. This quotation was taken from 9 June 1994 transcripts entitled “Challenges To U.S. Security In The 1990s: Building Domestic Support For Foreign Policy.”

2. Edward Luttwak, “Post- Heroic Armies,” *Foreign Affairs* Vol 75, no. 4 (July/Aug 1996): 34.

3. Eric Larson, *Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1996), iii.

4. *Global Engagement: A Vision for the 21st Century Air Force* is a comprehensive vision document intended to shape the Air Force during the first quarter of the 21st century. The document is published in coordination with the Chief of Staff of the Air Force and the Secretary of the Air Force.

5. John A. Tirpak, “Future Engagement,” *Air Force Magazine*, January 1997, 19.

6. Ibid., 21.

7. Edward Luttwak, “Where Are the Great Powers? At Home with the Kids,” *Foreign Affairs* Vol 73, no.4 (July/August 1994): 23.

8. The opinion that Haiti was not worth the life of any Americans was articulated by former Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney on NBC’s Meet the Press and shared by numerous Congressional leaders. Jacob Weisburg, “Zero Tolerance,” *New Yorker*, 10 October 1994, 21.

9. Larson, 3.

10. Karl W. Eikenberry, “Take No Casualties,” *Parameters*, Summer 1996, 109.

11. Eliot Cohen, “The Mystique of U.S. Air Power.” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 73, No 1 (Jan/Feb 1994): 109-122.

12. Thomas A. Keaney and Eliot A. Cohen, *Revolution in Warfare? Air Power in the Persian Gulf* (Annapolis Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 214.

13. Senator Sam Nunn, Federal News Service transcript of U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee hearing concerning the re-appointment of General John Shalikashvili as CJCS, 21 September 1995.

Chapter 2

America's Sensitivity to U.S. Military Casualties

As casualties mounted, the critique of American foreign policy shifted from challenging the effectiveness of the policy to questioning the necessity for it - from an assault on the worthiness of America's Vietnamese ally to challenging the worthiness of America, not just in Vietnam but globally as well.

Henry Kissinger

Introduction

The rancorous public debate surrounding the deployment of U.S. military forces to Haiti and Bosnia has caused many to question the utility of the U.S. military as an instrument of coercive diplomacy. A “credibility gap” exists because of a perception that the United States public is hyper-sensitive to U.S. military casualties and will demand withdrawal from military interventions when our forces suffer losses. This perception is rooted in the belief that domestic support for military operations in Korea, Vietnam, and Lebanon was lost after U.S. military casualties reached unacceptable levels.¹⁴ The withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Somalia, after 18 soldiers were killed by Somali gunmen in 3-4 October 1993 fighting on the streets of Mogadishu, is often cited as an example of America's hyper-sensitivity. However, recent research indicates that casualty sensitivity is but one factor in the equation which describes likely support for military intervention.

America's sensitivity to military casualties is the combination of the sensitivities of not only the public, but also our political and military leaders. The interaction of these three elements of society give America's casualty sensitivity a unique and often over-

looked dynamic. This chapter will explore America's casualty sensitivity by focusing on the sensitivity of each of the components as well as the interaction among them. Additionally, this chapter will explore the factors that tend to shape support for military intervention within each group.

U.S. Public Sensitivity to U.S. Military Casualties

Americans have always been sensitive to the human cost of warfare. However, there seems to be a disparity between the magnitude of the sacrifices deemed acceptable from one conflict to the next. Because public support for military intervention is highly desirable, we must strive to understand what factors influence the threshold for casualty tolerance and how those factors relate to public support for military action.

Edward N. Luttwak, a Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, suggests that America's seemingly increased sensitivity to U.S. military casualties is tied to a change in the nature of warfare, and to the demographics of post-industrial society. Luttwak suggests that the great risks associated with warfare during the cold war created a paradigm for military intervention. The paradigm "envisages only wars fought for great national purposes that can evoke public fervor, by armed forces that represent the aroused nation rather than merely a body of professionals going about their business."¹⁵ According to Luttwak, as a consequence of the passing of the cold war, we have entered an era of "post-heroic warfare" more reminiscent of eightieth century warfare, fought with limited and guarded resources for limited gains. Central to Luttwak's thesis is the notion that post-heroic warfare will rarely evoke popular enthusiasm and thus requires casualty avoidance as a controlling norm.¹⁶ Luttwak postulates that in an era of post-heroic warfare, popular support for military intervention is tied to, and can be altered by, minimizing the exposure of U.S. military forces at risk in combat.

Luttwak also ties America's sensitivity to casualties to the demographics of modern post-industrial society.¹⁷ He postulates that America's declining birth-rate has increased the emotional trauma of the loss of a child. Luttwak points to large families and correspondingly high infant mortality rates in the past, to support studies that suggest that death was a much more normal part of the family experience in previous years. Accord-

ing to Luttwak, “To lose a young family member for any reason was no doubt always tragic, yet a death in combat was not the extraordinary and fundamentally unacceptable event it has now become.”¹⁸

Professor Charles Moskos, of Northwestern University, takes exception to Luttwak’s observations and offers his own theory to explain what he sees as a heightened sensitivity to military casualties. Moskos suggests that it is not demographics or a heroic cause that sets the threshold for public acceptance of casualties, but rather it is who is willing to die for the cause. According to Moskos, “Only when the privileged classes perform military service does the country define the cause as worth young people’s blood. Only when the elite youth are on the firing line do war losses become more acceptable.”¹⁹ Moskos uses this argument to explain what he sees as a paradox in which Americans have a lower acceptance for combat casualties in today’s volunteer military than during periods of a general draft. According to this logic, the 291,557 battle deaths suffered during World War II²⁰ were accepted because virtually every able-bodied male served in the military.²¹ Moskos believes public support was secured during the Korean War and World War I for the same reason. However, he points to the evasion of the draft by “elite youths” as the turning point for public support of the Vietnam War.²² Moskos concludes that America’s citizens will accept hardships only when their leadership and national elite are viewed as self-sacrificing.²³

Unfortunately, neither Moskos nor Luttwak provides any depth of research to support his assertions. Fortunately, Dr. Eric Larson of the RAND Corporation recently conducted an in-depth analysis of polling data collected before, during and after U.S. military involvement in World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Panama, the Persian Gulf, and Somalia.²⁴ Larson’s research confirms Luttwak’s proposition that potential and actual casualties in military operations are important factors in achieving and maintaining domestic support. However, Larson suggests that the current focus on the public’s perceived unwillingness to tolerate casualties obscures a more salient issue. According to Larson, “support for U.S. military operations and willingness to tolerate casualties are based upon a sensible weighing of benefits and costs that is influenced heavily by consensus (or its absence) among political leaders.”²⁵ This finding points to an interesting para-

dox. While public attitudes are set by the objective content of the issue and by the positions of major policy makers;²⁶ policy makers tend to pre-view American opinion through polling data prior to defining their positions. Thus, an absence of bold leadership among U.S. policy makers diminishes the opportunity highlighted in Larson's study, to potentially shape the U.S. public's sensitivity to casualties.

Larson's survey data suggests that the relationship between public support for military operations and casualties is determined by the following factors:²⁷

- *The perceived benefits of the intervention.* The greater the perceived stakes, interests, or principles being promoted the higher the probability that the intervention will be supported.
- *The prospects for success.* The higher the probability that the intervention will meet its objectives, the higher the probability of support.
- *Prospective and actual costs.* The higher the prospective and actual costs, the lower the probability that the intervention will be supported.
- *Changing expectations.* The initial expectations of cost, prospects for success and benefits of intervention, provide a criterion by which to evaluate subsequent developments. Events which run contrary to expectations can lead to a revision of the ends-means calculus used to justify intervention.
- *The nature and depth of support for the intervention among other actors.* Political leaders and the public share a mutually constraining relationship, therefore the broader and deeper the support of the actors in one group the higher the probability that the actors in the other group will support the intervention.

Larson concludes that the public's willingness to tolerate casualties is based on the merits of each case. However, he warns that in the absence of "either moral force or broadly recognized national interests, support may be very thin indeed, and even a small number of casualties may often be sufficient to erode public support for the intervention."²⁸ Still, Larson's warning subtly contradicts conventional wisdom and allows room for policy makers crafting international policy in areas which are not of vital concern. However, other observers of public support make no such allowances. According to Dr. Larry Cable, of Duke University, the decision to employ military force must account for the belief that every American life is precious and the loss of life for purposes other than "a core interest consensually accepted as vital constitutes an unacceptable and unjustifiable waste of that life."²⁹

Dr. John Mueller, a professor of political science at the University of Rochester, offers an interesting perspective on the above findings. Mueller agrees that the public

applies a fairly reasonable cost-benefit analysis when evaluating intervention options.³⁰ However, he points out that “although there is an overwhelming political demand that casualties be extremely low, there seems to be little problem about keeping occupying forces in place in ventures deemed of little importance as long as they are not being killed.”³¹ Mark Conversino, a professor at the School of Advanced Airpower Studies, takes exception to this observation. Conversino points to declining Gallup polls six months after the bloodless occupation of Haiti to demonstrate that “the passage of time served to erode public support for an operation that was never very ‘popular’.”³² However, the absence of significant casualties in unpopular military operations like Haiti, and Bosnia, appears to give policy makers more flexibility in extending operations even in light of declining public support.³³

Political Leaders’ Sensitivity to Casualties

When political leaders consider committing military forces to foreign conflicts, they must consider not only the public’s reaction to potential personnel losses, but also the expected reaction of the political opposition.³⁴ Policy makers weighing the decision to employ military force must not only calculate the potential costs to the nation in blood and treasure but also the potential political effects of the intervention.

Leaders in America typically enjoy a short-term rise in popularity and support when they employ military force. A survey of public opinion data collected weekly from June 1950 to June 1975 suggests that even decisions that prove to be unpopular in the long run initially result in the public rallying to the president.³⁵ This rise in presidential approval ratings coincident to the employment of military force has been labeled the “rally-round-the-flag” effect.³⁶ However, the longevity of the rally effect is contingent on several factors, most notable being “the articulation of criticism by opinion leaders from either the media or political opposition.”³⁷ Criticism from either the political opposition or the media reduces the duration of the effect. To ensure political survival in a democracy, U.S. leaders must anticipate the effect of their policies on the politically relevant, domestic audience and also on their political rivals.³⁸ When politicians consider committing the nation’s military, the ambition to remain in power encourages political leaders

to behave more conservatively than if they viewed the holding of office as a burden rather than a prize.³⁹

Engaging in conflict can be very risky business for leaders in a democracy. A study by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Randolph M. Siverson, conducted in 1995, sought to answer the question: “What effect does international war participation have on the ability of political leaders to survive in office?”⁴⁰ The study included a broad data set of state involvement in international war from 1816 to 1975. The research team determined that “leaders who engage their nation in war subject themselves to a domestic political hazard that threatens the very essence of the office-holding *homo politicus*, the retention of political power.” For leaders in a democracy at war, escalating battle deaths carried a greater risk to the retention of power for a given government than even the final outcome of the conflict itself.⁴¹ This study supports and expands on Mueller’s observation that U.S. public support for military intervention in Vietnam declined in a logarithmic relationship to increasing battle deaths.⁴² However, the Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson study connects the loss of public support for military intervention due to casualties directly to political survival. One weakness of the study is that it fails to address reasons why some leaders maintain power despite horrific casualties in war where others do not. In any event the study does suggest that successful democratic governments will tend to choose to engage in conflicts where the costs are likely to be low.

It is important to keep in mind that even when engaged in total war, U.S. policy makers must still be sensitive to battle losses and their potential effects on public support. President Lincoln was concerned that the huge losses and marginal gains experienced by the Union Army prior to the 1864 elections might cost him the election and the abandonment of the cause.⁴³ Similarly, President Truman’s decision to use atomic weapons against Japan in World War II is often justified in terms of the cost in American lives and public support that would have resulted from an invasion of the Japanese homeland. However, it is in the realm of limited war that statesmen find the most pressing need to justify foreign policy goals in terms of losses. During the Korean and Vietnam wars, incumbent political parties were defeated, as casualties increased and the vital interests at stake became more unclear to the American electorate. The experiences of the Korean

and Vietnam wars spawned a political environment where concern over public support ensured that military force was employed only when objectives were expected to be met quickly with few casualties.⁴⁴ Domestic consensus carried over into foreign policy making and turned it on its head. According to Theodore Lowi, “Instead of an elite consensus guiding the nation there developed an institutionally fragmented elite seeking national consensus to be guided by.”⁴⁵

Another byproduct of the post-Vietnam environment is a tendency to overstate rationales for military interventions. Recent presidents have found it necessary to oversell threats in order to create temporary and possibly artificial cohesion among the members of the foreign policy establishment and public.⁴⁶ This “oversell” normally requires the creation of a moral crusade to justify military intervention. Saddam Hussein being compared to Hitler by President George Bush, and the Bosnia intervention being couched in terms of preventing another large-scale European war by President Bill Clinton are examples of such presidential oversell.⁴⁷ Although these tactics can be effective in garnering initial support, they can create as many problems as they solve and may even lead to greater commitment than reality requires.⁴⁸ The press, the public, and the political opposition are leery of this tactic.

Ultimately, the role of statesmen is to balance the potential cost of the war against the objectives sought and then to articulate the political limitations that shape the strategy and conduct of the war to the military. Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz described this delicate balance in his classic work, *On War*. According to Clausewitz, war is a political instrument and its conduct is governed by the political objectives sought.⁴⁹ In a democratic society, the political sensitivity to casualties, as influenced by public opinion, will be passed on to military strategists and reflected in the conduct of the conflict.

Military Sensitivity to Casualties

Force preservation is the cornerstone of modern US military doctrine. America resists maintaining a large standing army and until recently was reluctant to commit large numbers of forces to conflicts deemed peripheral to the main Soviet threat in Europe.⁵⁰ Although the National Guard and Reserve components of the total force are available for

Presidential call-up, full mobilization has significant political consequences and is therefore quite rare. Because of these factors it is natural that our military commanders view military manpower as a limited resource.⁵¹ Historically, the US military has compensated for this manpower limitation by pursuing weapons and doctrine that emphasize firepower and maneuver over mass and manpower.⁵² Furthermore, current military doctrine is increasingly influenced by the goal of casualty minimization. Interestingly, the justification offered for this goal is the preservation of public support rather than force preservation for operational reasons. Yet beyond the public and political pressures, American military leaders also must deal with possible personal reluctance to risk units they have trained and for which they are responsible.⁵³ This is especially true when the political and military objectives of an operation are ambiguous or the chances for success are remote.

According to Joint Publication 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, “The first fundamental for employment of United States joint forces is to achieve strategic aims as rapidly as possible, *with the least possible loss of American lives.*”⁵⁴ With this in mind, force protection becomes a primary consideration for military commanders at the outset of hostilities. The goal of the military commander is to conserve the fighting potential of his forces while attempting not to limit the boldness and audacity of that force.⁵⁵ This codified emphasis on force preservation seems to be an indication of things to come. According to *Joint Vision 2010*, “The American people will continue to expect us to win any engagement, but they will also expect us to be more efficient in protecting lives and resources while accomplishing the mission successfully.” The document goes on to explain that “risks and expenditures will be even more closely scrutinized than they are at present.”⁵⁶

Casualty minimization has also found its way into individual service doctrine. In the 1986 version of FM 100-5, *Operations*, the U.S. Army introduced the Airland Battle doctrine. At the heart of the doctrine was an effort to ensure that sufficient force strength was available for decisive action. The doctrine attempted to pave the way for swift, low casualty success through avoiding protracted battles of attrition.⁵⁷ A subtle shift in emphasis occurred between the 1986 document and its 1993 replacement. The 1993 version of FM 100-5 states that the Army “produces forces of the highest quality, able to win

quickly with minimum casualties,” and that “the American people expect decisive victories and abhor unnecessary casualties.”⁵⁸

The belief in a link between casualty minimization and maintaining public and political support does not stop with the Army. *US Naval Doctrine Publication 1* states that “rapid conclusion of hostilities is a key goal” because “protracted war can cause high casualties and unwanted political and economic consequences.”⁵⁹ The idea inherent in these documents is that the American public lacks the will to fight long and costly protracted wars. The Air force shares a similar view. The June 1990 White Paper *Global Reach—Global Power* states that we are entering an era in which “the American people will have a low tolerance for prolonged combat operations and mounting casualties.” This view appears to be destined for Air Force doctrine. The 21 May 1996, draft copy of *Air Force Doctrine Document 1* states that “The American people demand that their military operations be conducted quickly, discriminatorily, and with as few casualties as possible, including minimal collateral damage.”⁶⁰

The doctrines of the individual services are linked to the National Security Strategy (NSS) and the National Military Strategy (NMS). The views expressed in these documents maintain a remarkable consistency from one administration to the next. The 1992 NMS introduced the concept of “decisive force” when discussing how the military should be used. The concept of decisive force seeks to “overwhelm our adversaries and thereby terminate conflicts swiftly with minimum loss of life.” The 1992 NMS also refers to the need to avoid protracted conflicts “which can cause needless waste of human lives and material resources, a divided nation at home and defeat.”⁶¹ These themes are also present in the 1995 NMS and the 1996 *NSS of Engagement and Enlargement*. The 1996 NSS stresses the need to balance “interests against costs” and the fact that “the United States cannot long sustain a fight without the support of the public.”⁶² However, the document also stresses that “reflexive calls for early withdrawal of our forces as soon as casualties arise endangers our objectives and our troops.” This reference acknowledges the potential impact of military casualties on political and public support for military intervention. Unfortunately, the NSS fails to address the more substantive issues discussed in Larson’s study, those which influence domestic and political support for mili-

tary operations. The most important omission is the requirement to gain and maintain solidarity among U.S. political leadership for the intervention.

Aside from doctrinal influences, military leaders are often reluctant to risk troops whom they have trained and for which they feel responsible. When considering military intervention, our military leaders seek clear military objectives, political purposefulness and the forces required to do the job with acceptable risk. The Vietnam War and the 1982 deployment of U.S. Marine peacekeepers to Lebanon are examples of interventions that lacked clear objectives and political purposefulness.⁶³ Many senior military leaders, having experienced these conflicts, are committed to ensuring that the nation never repeats the same mistakes. As a result of this influence, senior military leaders tend to resist involvement in limited military operations for limited goals or unclear objectives.⁶⁴ Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell, was criticized in the press for his reluctance to recommend military intervention in the Gulf crisis and later in Bosnia. In a rebuttal published in the *New York Times*,² Powell reminds readers that the military success enjoyed by this nation from 1989 to 1992 were the result of carefully matched political objectives to the use of force. Powell stated that he could not recommend military intervention in Bosnia because there were no clear military goals. In the same article Powell articulated an obligation felt by many in the military: “We owe it to the men and women who go in harm’s way to make sure that their lives are not squandered for unclear purposes.”⁶⁵ Although the military cannot decide when military force will be used, military strategists can influence how the force will be applied through course of action development. Additionally, the counsel that military leaders provide to the political leadership will reflect an institutional reluctance to engage in conflicts where they do not perceive potential costs to be commensurate with the national interests at stake.

Conclusion

America’s sensitivity to military casualties is best described in terms of the Clausewitzian “remarkable trinity.” The degree of support for military operations that result in casualties is determined by the interaction of the trinity of the popular passion,

the political object and the operational instrument.⁶⁶ The impact each element of the trinity has on the decision to intervene and the development of strategy depends on the nature of the conflict. This is not a new phenomenon. Larson's study provides an excellent evidentiary base that tends to support his assertion that the current degree of sensitivity to U.S. military casualties is not new. Nor has the logic of when the U.S. public will support a military intervention changed. What has changed is the types of conflicts presented to the American people for approval, the information flow between political leaders and their constituencies, and the strength of political leadership.

In "an era of less than compelling threats" to the United States, the military will continue to be tasked to provide a stop-gap solution to the requirement for building consensus. With the focus on the public sensitivity to casualties, the political imperative to minimize casualties will tend to dominate military strategy. This was certainly the case in "Operation Dessert Strike," a B-52 conventional air launched cruise missile (CALCM) attack against Iraq on September 3, 1996. The air strategists who developed the courses of action (COAs) for this retaliatory strike received guidance from the National Command Authority that "no U.S. military casualties" would be acceptable on the mission.⁶⁷

As air strategists struggle to provide acceptable COAs in light of political and military constraints, it may become second nature to place the casualty issue on par with or even above issues of military efficiency. It is not hard to imagine this occurring when the Chief of Staff of the Air Force believes that, "In today's environment, denying an aggressor's war aims at minimum risk to American and coalition forces may often become the primary objective"⁶⁸ Because of this perception, the air strategist must be aware of all the factors that influence public sensitivity to casualties and shape political and military constraints as well.

Notes

¹⁴. Dennis M. Drew, "Inaccuracies Can Cloud the way a Military Thinks," *Air Force Times*. 29 April 1996, 54.

¹⁵. Edward N. Luttwak, "Toward Post-Heroic Warfare," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 74 No. 3 (May/June 1995): 110.

¹⁶. Ibid., 110.

¹⁷. Edward N. Luttwak, "Is Intervention A Thing of The Past?" *Harper's Magazine*, October 1994, 16.

¹⁸. Ibid., 16.

¹⁹. Charles Moskos, "When Americans Accept Casualties," *IUS Newsletter*, Winter 1996, 12.

Notes

- ²⁰. Harvey M. Sapolsky and Sharion K. Weiner, "War Without Casualties," *Across the Board*, October 1994, 42.
- ²¹. Moskos, 12.
- ²². Moskos' assertion runs contrary to Dr. John Mueller's analysis of polling data which suggests that Vietnam was not less popular than Korea until more people died there. (see fn. 23 below).
- ²³. Moskos, 12
- ²⁴. John Mueller, *Policy and Public Opinion in the Gulf War* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1-11. Mueller discusses the inherent weakness of polling data including question wording, order, and timing.
- ²⁵. Eric V. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations* (Santa Monica CA.: RAND, 1996), xv.
- ²⁶. John Mueller. "Fifteen Propositions About American Foreign Policy and Public Opinion In An Era Free Of Compelling Threats." Paper presented to The National Convention of the International Studies Association San Diego Ca, 31 March 1996, 4.
- ²⁷. Larson, 10-11.
- ²⁸. Ibid., 100.
- ²⁹. Larry Cable, "Getting Found in the Fog: The Nature of Interventionary Peace Operations," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol 7, No 1 (Spring 1996): 97-111.
- ³⁰. Mueller, "Fifteen Propositions," 7.
- ³¹. Ibid., 11.
- ³². Mark J. Conversino, "Sawdust Superpower: Perceptions of US Casualty in the Post-Gulf War Era," *Strategic Review* XXV, no. 1 (January 1997): 12.
- ³³. This proposition is about to be tested, as the House of Representatives has recently introduced legislation to extract U.S. peacekeeping forces from Bosnia despite the fact that only one serviceman has been killed in the peacekeeping operation.
- ³⁴. Karl W. Eikenberry, "Take No Casualties," *Parameters*, Summer 1996, 110.
- ³⁵. Theodore Lowi, "Making Democracy Safe for the World: On Fighting the Next War." in John Ikenberry, ed., *American Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1989), 274.
- ³⁶. John Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley, 1973), 208.
- ³⁷. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, and Randolph M. Siverson, "War and the Survival of Political Leaders: A Comparative Study of Regime Types and Political Accountability," *American Political Review*, Vol 89, No 4 (December 1995): 842.
- ³⁸. Karl W. Eikenberry, "Casualty Limitation and Military Doctrine," *Army*, Vol 44, No 2 (Feb 1994): 15.
- ³⁹. Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson, 843.
- ⁴⁰. Ibid., 841
- ⁴¹. Ibid., 851. The study found that it is easier for political leaders to survive low-cost wars than higher cost ones. The risk of being turned out of office increases by 8% with each order of magnitude increase in battle deaths per 10,000.
- ⁴². Stephen T. Hosmer, *Constraints on U.S. Military Strategy in Past Third World Conflicts* (Santa Monica CA.: RAND, July 1984), 75. Hosmer cites data collected by Dr. John Mueller.
- ⁴³. Peter J. Parish, *The American Civil War* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1981), 463-69.
- ⁴⁴. This is often referred to as the Vietnam syndrome.
- ⁴⁵. Lowi, 273
- ⁴⁶. Ibid., 272.
- ⁴⁷. Harvey M. Sapolsky and Jeremy Shapiro, "Casualties, Technology, and America's Future Wars," *Parameters*, Summer 1996, 124.
- ⁴⁸. After characterizing Saddam Hussein as evil incarnate, President Bush received extensive criticism for stopping the war with Saddam still in power, even though Saddam's removal was not a political or military objective.
- ⁴⁹. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and Trans, Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 89.

Notes

⁵⁰. The U.S. military was one of the largest in the world during the Cold War, yet when the cold war ended force levels dropped.

⁵¹. Eikenberry, "Take No Casualties," 111.

⁵². Sapolsky and Weiner, 41.

⁵³. Eikenberry, "Take No Casualties," 112.

⁵⁴. Joint Pub 3-0, "*Doctrine for Joint Operations*," 1 February 1995, II-1. Emphasis added.

⁵⁵. Ibid., IV-6.

⁵⁶. John M. Shalikashvili, *Joint Vision 2010*. Office of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government printing Office), 8. Joint Vision 2010 is a Department of Defense document which provides the CJCS's strategic vision of the for the armed forces.

⁵⁷. Eikenberry, "Take No Casualties," 114.

⁵⁸. FM 100-5 *Operations* (Washington: GPO,1993), ch 1.

⁵⁹. James R. Fitzsimonds, "The Coming Military Revolution: Opportunities and Risks," *Parameters*, Vol XXV, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 34.

⁶⁰. Air Force Doctrine Document 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine*, Draft, 21 May 1996.

⁶¹. Colin L. Powell, *National Military Strategy, Joint Chiefs of Staff* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, January 1992), 8-9.

⁶². William J. Clinton, *National Security Strategy of Enlargement and Engagement*, 19. This documents address the desire to avoid "needless waste of human life" but fails to explain what makes losses in a protracted conflict "needless." Protracted or not, public opinion polls suggest that the reasons for entering the conflict are what losses are measured against.

⁶³. The deployment of the first battalion 24th Marine Amphibious Unit ended in a withdrawal of forces after 241 Marines were killed in an October 1983 suicide bombing of the Marine barracks. The bombing prompted the Regan Administration to reevaluate the policy behind the deployment.

⁶⁴. Frank G. Hoffman, "Decisive Force: A New American Way Of War?" *Strategic Review*, Winter 1995, 23.

⁶⁵. Colin L. Powell, "Why Generals Get Nervous," *The New York Times*, October 8, 1992.

⁶⁶. Clausewitz, 80-81.

⁶⁷. Desert Strike Briefing, School of Advanced Airpower Studies, 30 January 1997, Maj. Gary Cox, HQ 8th AF.

⁶⁸. Ronald R. Fogleman, "What Air Power Can Do In Bosnia," *Wall Street Journal*, 11 October 1995, 15.

Chapter 3

Casualty Sensitivity and Strategy in Limited War

Heaven help us as a nation if we, once again, indulge in the expenditure of precious American blood, without popular support for it.

Alexander Haig, 1981

Introduction

According to Dr. Eric Larson, “It is now an article of faith in political and media circles that the American public will no longer accept casualties in U.S. military operations.”⁶⁹ Indeed, it appears that this sentiment is also accepted by Air Force leaders. Air Force Chief of Staff General Ronald Fogleman routinely advocates building an air force for the “new American way of war,” defined by his assumption that “the American public clearly does not accept casualties.”⁷⁰ However, evidence suggests that America’s perceived casualty sensitivity is not new, nor is it confined solely to the American public. Political and military leaders have personal pressures to minimize casualties in addition to anticipating public pressure. The combination of these pressures is more acute in limited war than in total war and therefore is more clearly reflected in strategy. In the Korean, Vietnam, and Gulf wars, policy makers relied on air power as a means to abate the costs of ground conflict. From a historical perspective, the marriage of casualty reduction with air power is natural. Air power advocates have long touted the ability of air power to deliver quick, low cost victory in war. This chapter will investigate to what degree perceived sensitivity to U.S. military casualties has permeated the Air Force’s institutional thinking, and what influence this thinking has had on the conduct of air operations in Korea, Vietnam, and Desert Storm.

Eliot Cohen points out in *Revolution in Warfare?* that “the experience of Desert Storm enhanced the attractiveness of air power by making it appear spectacularly cheap in terms of lives expended and effective in results achieved.”⁷¹ Interestingly, U.S. air power proponents have long couched the advantages of air power in these terms. In 1925, General William “Billy” Mitchell wrote that air power would make “conflict much more sharp, more decisive, and more quickly finished.” According to Mitchell, “This will result in diminished loss of life and treasure and thus will be a direct benefit to civilization.”⁷² Not surprisingly, the Air Corps Tactical School (ACTS) espoused similar ideas concerning the virtues of air power in the 1930’s. ACTS theorists postulated that it was possible to bring about the submission of an enemy without the “huge expenditures of lives, money, and effort” involved in the clash of great armies.⁷³ Undoubtedly, these expectations were carried into World War II in the hope that the Combined Bomber Offensive against Germany would obviate the necessity of a costly land invasion. Unfortunately, air power failed to meet many of the expectations of the pre-war enthusiasts. Yet, in the glow of the dawn of the atomic bomb, the institutional vision stayed alive.

1945-1950

As the Army Air Force struggled to secure its independence and establish itself as a separate service, it also had to define its role in the postwar strategic security environment. In an effort to deal with the pressing issues facing the service immediately after World War II, Air Force General Carl “Tooe” Spaatz created an Air Board. In a memorandum from April 1946, Spaatz laid out his vision for the creation of the Air Board: “I take it we are of common belief that war ought to be avoided if possible, but we must plan in such a way that if war comes, we shall meet the enemy with maximum effectiveness, with the least possible violence to our people and in a manner which will avoid waste.”⁷⁴ This notion of lowering the potential cost warfare was perpetuated in the B-36 debates of 1947. In testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, Stuart W. Symington, the first Secretary of the Air Force, defended the B-36 bomber for its deterrent benefits when coupled with the atomic bomb. Symington stated that “if war comes, we believe that the atomic bomb, plus the air power to deliver it, represents the one

means of unleashing prompt crippling destruction upon the enemy, with absolute minimum combat exposure of American lives.”⁷⁵ The implications of this stance were clear to the Navy. In April and May 1948, an anonymous document began circulating, which charged that the Air Force was obsessed with the belief “that airplanes can reduce warfare to clean, quick, inexpensive, and to our side a painless procedure.”⁷⁶ Unfortunately, our experiences in the Korean and Vietnam Wars offered little evidence to support the notion that air power could make war a painless procedure.

The Korean War

When the North Korean army poured across the 38th parallel on 25 June 1950, the Far East Air Force (FEAF) was not in a position to provide a quick, or low casualty, solution to the problem. On the contrary, the FEAF was engaged in a fight for survival. In the end, the seesaw conflict resulted in a stalemate. From June 1950 until the armistice three years later, the U.S. lost 33,651 servicemen killed in action, including 1,144 airmen, and 1,041 aircraft.⁷⁷ The months of bloody stalemate following the Chinese entry into the war eroded U.S. domestic support for the war and heightened political and military sensitivities to U.S. combat losses.

The FEAF was particularly sensitive to combat losses. This sensitivity was heightened because of resource limitations imposed on the FEAF by USAF headquarters. General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, the USAF Chief of Staff, had to balance FEAF requests for aircraft and aircrew against the greater strategic considerations of being prepared for a possible Russian attack in Europe.⁷⁸ FEAF commander General George Stratemeyer also faced competing interests. The FEAF was tasked to support the war as well as an ongoing air defense mission over the Japanese mainland. Because of these constraints, Stratemeyer allocated his units supporting the Korean conflict the minimum number of aircraft consistent with their missions. The unrelenting resource limitations placed on FEAF commanders forced them to adopt strategies and tactics to conserve aircraft and aircrew, often at the expense of combat effectiveness. This situation caused Lt. Gen Otto Weyland, Commander FEAF after June 1951, to lament “Nothing is so bad in air campaigns as not to have enough forces to do the job correctly.”⁷⁹

The first major interdiction campaign conducted in the war, Interdiction Plan 4, was terminated after the Chinese offensive in April and May 1951. The questionable effectiveness of the interdiction strategy and the excessive losses⁸⁰ associated with rail interdiction and armed reconnaissance missions drove a change of strategies.⁸¹ Even with changes in strategy and tactics, Chinese countermeasures, particularly anti-aircraft fire, continued to exact a high price for interdiction efforts. The Rail Interdiction Program of August-December 1951, and Operation Saturate conducted in 1952, were both eventually abandoned when losses became unsustainable relative to perceived gains.⁸² For air planners, the rail interdiction strategy had evolved into the simple equation of achieving a maximum percentage of rail cuts in inverse proportion to personnel losses and battle damage to aircraft.⁸³

In addition to changes in overall strategies, FEAF commanders continually adjusted tactics to minimize friendly losses. Fighter-bombers sacrificed the accuracy of low-level bomb runs for safer dive bombing techniques and instituted minimum “pull out” altitudes to reduce the AAA threat.⁸⁴ However, the most significant tactical adjustments were adopted by the Bomber Command. Bomber vulnerability to the MiG-15 attacks in the spring of 1951 resulted in the curtailment of operations against bridges along the Yalu River and restricted operations into MiG Alley.⁸⁵ Similarly, B-29s switched primarily to night operations, using radio navigation, in October 1951, after losses during rail and airfield attacks had reached unacceptable levels.⁸⁶ Viewed at the operational level, the concern over air losses was fueled by the desire to maintain fighting forces at effective levels. However, after the ground war stagnated in summer of 1951, public pressure to reduce ground casualties and terminate the conflict began to dominate air strategy.

The initiation of truce talks in July 1951 marked the beginning of a steady decline in public support for the Korean war.⁸⁷ Several factors contributed to rapid decline in support. The first was a change in the public's perception of the chances for a swift and successful termination of the war. General Douglas A. MacArthur's brilliant success in orchestrating the division and defeat of the North Korean Army following an amphibious landing at Inchon had raised the hopes of many Americans that U.S. troops would be

home by Christmas. However, in November 1950, the Chinese entered the war and drove United Nations forces out of North Korea. By March 1951, 50 percent of Americans polled did not believe either side could win military victory.⁸⁸

The second factor undermining public support was a change in the perception of potential benefits of the war. President Truman had justified the U.S. entry into the war on the grounds of protecting the free world from communist aggression and preventing escalation to another World War.⁸⁹ The initial military objective established by the United Nations was to repel the North Korean invasion. This objective was abandoned by the United Nations after U.N. forces drove deep into North Korea. The success of the U.N. operations inspired the United Nations to seek the unification of the peninsula. However, after the Chinese entered the war and drove U.N. forces back to the 38th parallel, the United Nations was forced to abandon its objective of unification.⁹⁰

The third factor undermining public support was an erosion of political consensus about the handling of the war among American's leaders. Many members of Congress and the military had difficulty adjusting to the limited nature of the conflict and openly criticized Truman for his management of the war. This criticism was heightened after Truman relieved MacArthur of command for insubordination. The Republicans sided with the General and echoed his criticism that it was Truman's meddling in the war that kept it from being won.⁹¹ The public also sided with MacArthur. His status as a World War II hero gave credence to his claim that the Korean war was being mishandled. Many Americans identified with MacArthur and agreed with his dictum that in war "There is no substitute for victory."⁹² This sentiment became more acute as the peace talks bogged down.

In addition to the factors above, U.S. military casualties played a significant part in weakening support for the war. The mounting casualties during the U.N. retreat from positions near the Yalu river, and subsequent bloody fighting along the 38th parallel, aggravated America's disenchantment with the war. In the later half of 1951, U.N. forces along the 38th parallel launched a series of attacks to secure more favorable defensive positions and exert pressure on the peace talks. These attacks resulted in over 40,000 U.N. casualties. The significant costs of these operations coupled with the dubious gains cap-

tured America's attention, and ensured that casualty concerns would dominate the remainder of the conflict.⁹³ Based on polling data taken during the conflict, support for the war declined by 15 percent for each increase by a factor of ten in casualties.⁹⁴

In order to maintain support for the war until a negotiated settlement could be reached, Truman had to rely on a strategy that could minimize the cost of the U.S. commitment.⁹⁵ Viewed in this context, air losses in Korea were tolerated at the strategic level because of the perceived benefits of the air war to the ground effort. Mounting domestic pressure spurred U.S. leaders to institute specific policies to hold down battlefield casualties. Both General MacArthur and his successor General Matthew Ridgway received explicit instruction from President Truman to limit U.S. casualties.⁹⁶ Secretary of Defense Frank Pace wrote General Ridgway in October 1951 to advise him of a "strong adverse reaction" to the conduct of the war at home and particularly in Congress. Under political pressure, Ridgway adopted a strategy of active defense in November 1951. After November, the "estimated costs in personnel losses" dominated all decisions on military operations."⁹⁷ For the remainder of the conflict, the United States relied mainly on air attacks to maintain pressure on the enemy and reduce battlefield casualties.

In 1952 the FEAF adopted the Air Pressure strategy in an effort to coerce the communists into accepting terms for a settlement. Air Pressure involved the "selective destruction of items of high value to the Communist nations fighting in Korea."⁹⁸ In addition to Air Pressure, the FEAF continued interdiction mission focusing on communist personnel and materiel to blunt their offensive capabilities.⁹⁹ Despite these efforts, the negotiations dragged on for two years and the war remained unpopular. It is interesting to note that even before the stalemate, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General Hoyt Vandenberg, expressed concern about U.S. casualties and public opinion to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the State department. Perhaps reflecting an institutional sensitivity, General Vandenberg questioned "how long the U.S. public would tolerate the trade of irreplaceable Americans for expendable Chinese?"¹⁰⁰

The devastating political consequences of the war on the Truman administration left an indelible impression in the minds of U.S. political leaders.¹⁰¹ America's political leaders learned that domestic sensitivity to U.S. military casualties in limited conflicts

demanded alternative military strategies.¹⁰² Just over a decade later, the fate of another administration would rest on the hope that air power could deliver a quick and low cost alternative to ground combat.

The Vietnam Conflict

America's involvement in the fighting in Vietnam grew out of gradual increases in aid and commitment to the South Vietnamese in their struggle against communist guerrillas.¹⁰³ In 1965, after five years of gradual military build-up, the Johnson Administration altered American policy in Southeast Asia and began more direct participation in the war. American ground forces entered combat in large numbers and air power was used against targets in both North and South Vietnam.¹⁰⁴ The major air campaigns of the Vietnam War were constructed on the hope that air power would bring concessions from the Hanoi government, while reducing the risk of widening the war and requirements for larger U.S. ground presence. Air Force leadership insisted that, given free reign in target selection and campaign execution, they could do just that. However, because of the highly political nature of the conflict, many of the details of the air strategy were directed by Washington. In the final analysis, the contributions made by air power to reduce military casualties and expedite the end of the war were very costly.

The Johnson administration was extremely sensitive to domestic political concerns, and chief among them was maintaining support, or at least limiting opposition, for the war effort. The administration apparently recognized a link between public support and U.S. casualties. While the "rally-around-the-flag" effect¹⁰⁵ contributed to solid public support for in 1965, as U.S. forces engaged in combat and casualties were incurred support began to decline.¹⁰⁶ The Johnson administration recognized that increasing opposition to the war could derail foreign policy efforts as well as domestic agendas. In a May 1967 memorandum, the Defense Department's system analysis office offered keen insight into the dynamics of public opinion and support for the war.

If we are to stay [in Southeast Asia], we must have the backing of the U.S. electorate. As we divert resources from other national goals, as U.S. lives are lost, and as the electorate sees nothing but endless escalation and sacrifice for the future, an increasing fraction will become discouraged. If this

keeps on in the future as it has in the past, we will have to leave SEA before stability is achieved, losing all that we have invested up to that point . . . If we are not to lose everything, the trends will have to be changed: the increased unfavorable public opinion will have to be slowed; the development of SVN society will have to be speeded.”¹⁰⁷

Heeding the advice of his advisors, Johnson pursued strategies to reduce U.S. combat losses and turn more fighting over to the South Vietnamese forces.¹⁰⁸ In March 1965, Johnson’s desire to control casualties was reflected in the first major bombing campaign of the war. In Operation Rolling Thunder, Secretary of Defense McNamara designated “avoiding undue risk and cost” as one of his five principles by which to accomplish the air campaign.¹⁰⁹ During the campaign, President Johnson insisted that U.S. officials “weigh heavily in each case whether U.S. losses might be excessive in attacking targets in North Vietnam.” This directive resulted in civilian officials frequently refusing to approve targets considered of insufficient value to merit the probable cost in American aircraft and pilots.¹¹⁰ Paradoxically, the political imperative to avoid expanding the conflict often superseded efforts to minimize air losses.¹¹¹ By October 1968, Operation Rolling Thunder had cost the nation 800 dead or captured airmen and 990 aircraft.¹¹²

Support for the Vietnam War became increasingly tenuous from mid-1966 on. Several factors contributed to the weakening of public support for the war. Americans had a hard time relating the war in Vietnam directly to vital national security concerns; by 1967 less than 48 percent of subjects polled felt they had “a clear idea what the war was all about.”¹¹³ Another factor undermining support was the perceived benefits of the conflict. The political objective of achieving a negotiated settlement rather than an out-right victory limited the public’s expected gains from the conflict. Not surprisingly, to most opinion leaders and the public the limited benefits of the war justified only limited means.¹¹⁴ Few Americans polled believed that the war in Vietnam justified human costs on par with the Korean war or the sacrifice of cherished domestic programs.

Additionally, by 1966 vocal opinion to the war had increased. American politicians and intellectuals became increasingly dissatisfied with the war and voiced their misgivings in Senate hearings conducted in February and March 1966.¹¹⁵ This erosion of consensus among America’s opinion shapers contributed to the polarization of the U.S. public.¹¹⁶ As antiwar sentiment grew, Congressional opponents of the war attempted to

limit U.S. involvement in the war through legislation. One tactic legislators used was to attach amendments calling for withdrawal of U.S. forces by a specific dates to military appropriations bills. Some of these bills were only narrowly defeated.¹¹⁷ It is important to note, however, that in Vietnam and Korea the majority of the U.S. public did not favor withdrawal from the conflicts while American POWs were in enemy hands.¹¹⁸

Finally, the Tet Offensive in early 1968 changed the perception of America's prospects for success. The Johnson administration's and the military's optimistic rhetoric concerning U.S. military control in South Vietnam did not prepare the American public for the depth and magnitude of the Viet Cong counter-offensive.¹¹⁹ The final factor influencing public support for the conflict was mounting casualties. By 1968 several hundred U.S. servicemen were dying each week and the rate of casualties had reached comparable rates to the Korean war. By March 1969 the number of battle deaths had reached 34,000, the final toll of the Korean war.¹²⁰

The rising costs of the war, coupled with the impact of Tet in 1968, mortally wounded the Johnson administration.¹²¹ In January 1969, President Richard Nixon took the reins of the war effort in Vietnam. However, his military options were severely constrained by adverse trends in public opinion, particularly by demands to reduce U.S. casualties.¹²² Polling data indicated that the public would give grudging support to efforts to secure a negotiated settlement contingent on an orderly withdrawal of troops and the release of American prisoners of war.¹²³ With few options available, Nixon decided on a strategy which entailed a steady withdrawal of American troops, an increased reliance on air power, and strengthening the South Vietnamese military.

The Linebacker campaigns in 1972 contributed to expediting successful peace negotiations. However, the air war in Vietnam was a costly ordeal. In the course of the conflict the United States lost 3,720 fixed wing aircraft.¹²⁴ As in Korea, air losses were a politically acceptable alternative to continued ground losses. In preparation for the Linebacker II bombing campaign, President Nixon was warned to expect a 3 percent attrition rate for B-52s used in the attacks. In his diary Nixon stated, "we simply have to take losses if we are going to accomplish our objectives."¹²⁵ The campaign did prove costly to

the B-52 force, but it was not until mission losses reached 6 percent that the commander of SAC, General J. C. Meyer, revamped Linebacker tactics.¹²⁶

In general, Air Force commanders in Southeast Asia reacted to combat losses much like their Korean War counterparts. In South Vietnam, most aircraft losses occurred at altitudes below 2,000 feet due to ground fire. Therefore, when ground forces were not involved in the operation, the minimum pull out altitude for aerial interdiction missions for fighter bombers was raised to 3,500 feet.¹²⁷ Similarly, a variety of airframes were eventually withdrawn from interdiction operations as SAM threats increased throughout North Vietnam and Laos. In both the Korean and Vietnam wars, air losses were controlled by modifying tactics but strategic imperatives in both conflicts over-rode operational concerns over casualties. Interestingly, in the Gulf war, limiting ground and air casualties overrode coalition concerns about impaired operational effectiveness.¹²⁸

The Vietnam Syndrome

The air war in Vietnam failed to live up to the USAF's vision of quick, low cost warfare. However, the innate potential of air power continued to impact policy decisions and options aimed at avoiding "another Vietnam." The Vietnam War and America's 1983 misadventure in Lebanon precipitated the formulation of doctrine to guide statesmen in the employment of military force. In 1984, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger enunciated a guide to aid in military intervention decisions. The "Weinberger doctrine" established six major criteria to be met before the United States would commit military forces abroad:

- Vital interests of the U.S. or its allies must be at stake.
- Willingness to commit enough forces to achieve military objectives must exist.
- Clearly defined political and military objectives must be established.
- Intervention must be subjected to continues reassessment
- There must be a reasonable assurance of public support.
- The use of combat power should be a last resort.¹²⁹

Despite criticisms from some members of government who felt the criteria were too restrictive,¹³⁰ the Weinberger doctrine served the Bush Administration well as the 1990

Gulf crisis evolved into war. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Bush administration, General Colin Powell, forwarded another strategic framework for the use of force. Powell advocated criteria similar to Weinberger's, but Powell emphasized the concept of "decisive force." Powell advanced the belief that military force should only be used in a manner to ensure success quickly and overwhelmingly.¹³¹ General Powell's doctrine and the Weinberger doctrine were designed to insure military success, retain public support, and save U.S. military lives.¹³² The core of these doctrinal efforts was included in the Bush administration's *Defense Strategy for the 1990s*. The strategy is summarized by the excerpt, "Thus, our response to regional crises must be decisive, requiring the high-quality personnel and technological edge to win quickly and with minimum casualties."¹³³ As the Persian Gulf War approached, Air Force Chief of Staff General Michael Dugan was eager to emphasize air power's role in fulfilling this strategy. Dugan suggested that America's high-tech air arm could so devastate the enemy that land forces could "walk in and not have to fight."¹³⁴

Desert Storm

As the Gulf War approached in late 1990, President George Bush maneuvered to secure public support and maintain political consensus for military actions. When considering the use of force, the discussions among policy makers revolved around projected U.S. casualties. The Gulf War military strategy was largely shaped by the goals of holding down friendly casualties and limiting collateral damage. The planning and execution of the air campaign was the ultimate reflection of a synergy created by a shared political and military concern. The Gulf War finally vindicated the Air Force's long-held promise that air power could contribute to quick, low casualty warfare.

The top leadership in the U.S. during the Gulf crisis was sensitive to the need to build and maintain public support for possible military action.¹³⁵ Their efforts to do so paid off. By November 1990, polling data indicated that 83 percent of Americans surveyed believed that the U.S. had 'vital interests' in Saudi Arabia and 77 percent felt the same way about Kuwait.¹³⁶ Interestingly, intense political debate questioning the effectiveness of the sanctions being used to coerce Iraq out of Kuwait increased the public's

perception that war was inevitable.¹³⁷ In December 1990, 78 percent of Americans polled felt that there were good reasons to go to war with Iraq. According to Larson, support for military action was also associated with a growing list of grievances against Iraq: taking western hostages, atrocities in Kuwait, and the development of weapons of mass destruction.¹³⁸ However, Mueller points out that support for Bush's handling of the crisis actually dropped slightly in October and then remained constant until the war began.¹³⁹ Yet as the air war commenced on 16 January 1991, *Washington Post* polling data indicates that nearly 80 percent of Americans surveyed approved of the war and that approval generally increased throughout the conflict.¹⁴⁰

The American public had little doubt that the U.S. would prevail in the conflict with Iraq, however questions lingered as to acceptable cost. Official estimates of possible U.S. military casualties ranged from several thousand to as high as ten to twenty thousand.¹⁴¹ A majority of the Americans polled who supported the war felt that the conflict would result in "several thousand casualties."¹⁴² Still public support remained high despite the prospect of substantial casualties—substantial, that is, for a nation that had not experienced more than a few hundred casualties since Vietnam.

In spite of an apparent willingness to accept thousands of casualties, Americans were eager to support efforts to minimize them. In a 8-10 February 1991 Harris/NPR poll, 87 percent of those surveyed favored heavy bombing of Iraq and Kuwait to weaken enemy ground forces and reduce friendly casualties. Of the same group, 74 percent were willing to risk a longer war if the extension would result in lower casualties.¹⁴³ However, concern over minimizing casualties was far from being confined solely to the U.S. public.

After briefing President Bush on the air strategy for Operation Desert Storm, Joint Force Air Component Commander (JFACC) General Charles Horner was impressed by the President's concern about casualties. As a result of this meeting, General Horner later commented that "I used limiting the loss of life as a yard stick by which I measured later every one of our actions."¹⁴⁴ Horner's concern for limiting losses was aimed at limiting air losses as much as shaping the battlefield to reduce ground losses. However, Horner's emphasis on limiting air losses was unparalleled in U.S. aerial warfare. The JFACC's intent to minimize losses was captured in a common dictum among his planners that "no

target is worth an airplane.”¹⁴⁵ As the air campaign unfolded, the seriousness of this rhetoric became evident. A-10s were restricted from attacking Republican Guard units after two aircraft were lost in an attack.¹⁴⁶ Additionally, the loss of two F-16s on a daylight attack on Baghdad resulted in the cessation of daylight attacks on the city by manned platforms. In a 1996 article, General Horner stated “Casualty concerns also dictated which assets went ‘downtown.’ Despite the larger number of critical targets in Baghdad, only the F-117 [stealth fighter] and the Tomahawk cruise missile were used to attack the heavily defended Iraqi capital.”¹⁴⁷ Similarly, F-16s on aerial interdiction missions were directed to operate at altitudes above the AAA threat, resulting in a significant reduction in bombing accuracy.¹⁴⁸ Referring to the high altitude employment of many coalition aircraft, Horner stated that “In planning and executing the air campaign we emphasized tactics and systems that minimized aircraft losses, even though it limited to some degree the effectiveness of our attacks.”¹⁴⁹

The imperative to minimize air losses resulted in the sub-optimal employment of Navy F-14’s and F/A-18s as well. Stringent identification criteria required that interceptors have both a positive indication that a contact was hostile and a negative response to an IFF interrogation prior to engagement. Unlike USAF F-15s, the Navy F-14 and F/A-18 could not satisfy both requirements without AWACS assistance,¹⁵⁰ thus they were not employed in the forwardmost CAP stations. As a result of this restriction, the capability of the F-14’s AIM-54C Phoenix missile was forfeited. The Phoenix’s unparalleled long range and capability against receding targets could have played a significant role in stopping Iraqi aircraft fleeing to Iran.¹⁵¹ Clearly, Desert Storm marked a new threshold for sensitivity to combat losses in our air forces.

The technological superiority of U.S. weapon systems employed in the Gulf War enabled air planners to reduce friendly aircraft losses without jeopardizing campaign objectives. Prudent tactical measures, coupled with the use of stealth, precision guided munitions (PGMs), and stand-off munitions, resulted in a remarkably low combat loss rate of only 20 U.S. aircraft.¹⁵² However, even more remarkable was the extent to which the air campaign contributed to shaping the ground battle.

The thirty-nine day air war was designed to reduce the fighting effectiveness of the Iraqi army and destroy 50 percent of its armor and artillery.¹⁵³ When the ground campaign commenced, many Iraqi units, ill-fed and equipped, surrendered en masse. The swiftness and low casualties of the ground campaign impressed participants and observers alike. Eliot Cohen summed up the common feeling that “Although ground action necessarily consummated the final victory for coalition forces, air power had made the final assault as effortless as a wartime operation can be.”¹⁵⁴ A total of 293 U.S. personnel were killed in action during the conflict. One interesting result of this unprecedented success was the emergence of the feeling that the victory in the Gulf had established a new standard for success in warfare. Gulf War Air Power Survey personnel discovered a near universal agreement “that low casualties experienced in Desert Storm established a norm that the U.S. military will have to meet in future wars.”¹⁵⁵ The success of the war and U.S. efforts to minimize casualties were rewarded by high levels of support and perception that the costs of the war were worthwhile.

Conclusion

America’s air leaders have emphasized America’s sensitivity to casualties as a major selling point for air power. However, it was not a hard case to make. Air power fit nicely into the American inclination to substitute firepower for manpower. This substitution was particularly important in limited wars where political and public sensitivity to casualties was heightened. Thus in Korea, Vietnam, and Desert Storm, air strategy was built around the larger political imperative to reduce ground losses. Unfortunately for the airmen involved, the resultant strategies were often very costly in terms of aircraft and aircrew lost. With respect to air losses, Desert Storm was an anomaly. Still, many political and military leaders have recaged their expectations of future war based on the Gulf War experience.

The Air Force has not missed the opportunity to exploit this expectation. Official USAF publications are replete with assertions that air power alone can meet national security needs while satisfying the public’s desire to reduce casualties. The introduction to *Air Force Doctrine Document 1* asserts that “The American people demand that their

military operations be conducted quickly, discriminately, and with as few casualties as possible, including collateral damage. Aerospace power not only meets the demands of modern warfare, but also provides new value in the US aggregate military capability.”¹⁵⁶ Similarly, the Air Force’s strategic vision, expressed in *Global Engagement*, claims that the Air Force will become the “strategic instrument of choice” for our national leaders because of its ability to engage while “putting as few Americans in harm’s way as possible.”¹⁵⁷ Although this is an admirable goal, it seems misplaced in Air Force doctrine. Aerial and ground warfare may once again prove to be very costly. If the dictum that “no target is worth an airplane” becomes too ingrained in our institutional thinking we may lose the operational flexibility required to act boldly and decisively.

Notes

- 69 Eric Larson, *Casualties and Consensus, The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1996), iii. Dr. Larson builds a case that American public support for military operations is contingent on more than numbers of U.S. military casualties.
- 70 Johan Benson, “Conversations with Gen. Ronald Fogleman,” *Aerospace America*, July 1995, 17. General Fogleman did not qualify this statement in terms of a particular kind of conflict.
- 71 Thomas A. Keaney and Eliot Cohen, *Revolution in Warfare? Air Power in the Persian Gulf* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 213.
- 72 William Mitchell, *Winged Defense* (New York: Dover Publications, 1925), 16.
- 73 ACTS Lecture: “The Air Force” (AF-2 1934-35)
- 74 Herman S. Wolk, *Organizing the Postwar Air Force* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History United States Air Force, 1984), 145.
- 75 Robert Frank Futrell, *Ideas, Concepts, Doctrine, Basic Thinking in the United States Air Force 1907-1960* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 1989), 254.
- 76 Futrell Vol I, 251.
- 77 Robert Frank Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea 1950-1953* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1983), 692.
- 78 Thomas C. Hone, *Case Studies in the Achievement of Air Superiority* (Washington D.C.: Center for Air Force History, 1994), 454.
- 79 Eduard Mark, *Aerial Interdiction in Three Wars*, (Washington D.C.: Center for Air Force History, 1994), 324.
- 80 Futrell, 446. The FEAF paid a high price for the rail interdiction strategies. From August to October of 1950 the 5th AF alone lost 115 aircraft destroyed and another 750 were damaged..
- 81 Mark, 304.
- 82 Mark, 313-314 and Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea 1959-1953*, 474.
- 83 Mark, 313.
- 84 Mark, 313, and Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea 1959-1953*, 519.
- 85 Mark, 314.
- 86 Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea 1959-1953*, 412. Five B-29s were lost in the month of October. Up to that point only six had been lost in the conflict.
- 87 Larson, 20.
- 88 Ibid., 20
- 89 Ibid., 20
- 90 Futrell, 373.
- 91 John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley Press, 1973), 229.
- 92 Futrell, 374.
- 93 Stephen T. Hosmer, *Constraints on U.S. Military Strategies In Past Third World Conflicts* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1984), 76.
- 94 Mueller, 60.
- 95 Larson, 59.
- 96 Futrell, Vol I, 298. Truman repeatedly reminded MacArthur that preservation of forces was his primary objective.
- 97 Hosmer, 77.
- 98 Futrell, 479.

Notes

- 9999 Ibid., 478.
- 100 Hosmer, 76.
- 101 Truman's handling of the war contributed to his low presidential approval ratings and failure to secure re-election. Mueller, 27.
- 102 Walton S. Moody, *Building a Strategic Air Force, Air Force* (Washington D.C.: History and Museums Programs, 1996), 352.
- 103 According to Dr. Mueller commitments to South Vietnam were made in part, to avoid the mistake of 1950 when Secretary of State Dean Acheson failed to mention Korea in the first line of defense against communist expansion (Mueller, 28).
- 104 Mueller, 28.
- 105 Ibid., 53.
- 106 Hosmer, 78.
- 107 Pentagon Papers, Vol. 4, 457. In Stephen T. Hosmer, *Constraints on U.S. Military Strategies In Past Third World Conflicts* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1984), 78.
- 108108 Hosmer, 78.
- 109 Earl H. Tilford, *Setup* (Maxwell AFB AL: Air University Press, 1991), 106.
- 110 Hosmer, 74-75.
- 111 Tilford, 124. Requests from the Joint Chiefs of Staff for permission to destroy SAM sites before they became operational were denied for fear that Chinese or Soviet technicians working at the sites might be killed. In 1965, 25 of the 171 aircraft lost over North Vietnam were lost to SAMs.
- 112 Ibid., 130.
- 113 Mueller, 63.
- 114 Larson, 27.
- 115 Mueller notes that the Fulbright Hearings in February and March 1966 probably made dissent more respectable because of the examples set by prominent politicians and intellectuals. 53.
- 116 Mueller, 53.
- 117 Hosmer, 81.
- 118 Mueller, "The Common Sense," 83. According to Dr. Mueller, in May 1971 polls indicated that 68 percent of the participants agreed that U.S. troops should be withdrawn from Vietnam by the end of the year. Yet, when asked if they approved of withdrawal "even if it threatened [not cost] the lives or safety of United States POWs," support dropped to 11 percent.
- 119 Although the Tet offensive was a tactical failure for the Viet Cong, resulting in massive losses, its influence on public opinion gave it strategic significance.
- 120 Larson, 28-29.
- 121 Ibid., 64.
- 122 Hosmer, 80.
- 123 Larson, 66. In both the Korean and Vietnam Wars Americans polled consistently refused to accept the idea of a military withdrawal with American POWs in enemy hands.
- 124 Benjamin S. Lambeth, "The Maturation and Promise of American Air Power"(Draft copy), 7.
- 125 Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 185.
- 126 Ibid., 187.
- 127 William W. Momyer, *Air Power in Three Wars* (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1978) 280.
- 128 Charles A. Horner, "What We Should Have Learned From Desert Storm But Didn't," *Air Force Magazine* December 1996 55. In a recent article General Charles A. Horner, USAF (ret.) the Desert Storm Joint Forces Air Component Commander, commented that in the execution of the air campaign coalition air forces sacrificed a degree of effectiveness to minimize aircraft losses: "We gave casualty avoidance priority over military effectiveness because it was the morally correct thing to do."
- 129 Caspar W. Weinberger, "The Uses of Military Power," National Press Club speech, November 28, 1984.
- 130 Secretary of State George Shultz was a prominent figure in opposition to the Weinberger doctrine. Opponents of the doctrine felt that it was too restrictive and not applicable to low intensity conflict.
- 131 Frank Hoffman, "Decisive Force: A New American Way of War?" *Strategic Review* Winter 1995 24.
- 132 Ibid., 58.
- 133 Dick Cheney, *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy* (Washington: GPO, 1993), 15.
- 134 Rick Atkinson, *Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993), 292.
- 135 Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Collin Powell and Joint Force Commander General Norman Schwarzkopf had both served in Southeast Asia and were committed to ensuring that the failures of that war were not repeated in the Gulf.
- 136 Larson, 32.
- 137 Ibid., 33.

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- 138 Ibid., 34.
- 139 John Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 24.
- 140 Ibid., 202.
- 141 Ibid., 124.
- 142 Larson, 39.
- 143 Ibid., 39.
- 144 Lt Gen Charles A. Horner. Transcript of an interview with Lt Col Susanne B. Gehri, 2 Dec 1991, Desert Story collection. USAF Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB AL.
- 145 Keaney and Cohen, 214. Cohen notes that this dictum did not hold true when it came to supporting ground troops in contact with the enemy or rescuing a downed pilot.
- 146 Ibid., 214.
- 147 Horner, 55.
- 148 Phone interview with Desert Storm F-16 pilot, Maj. Randal Bright, HQ 12th AF, 10 February 1997.
- 149 Horner, 55.
- 150 The F-14 and F-18 had IFF limitations which precluded compliance with the JFACC directed rules of engagement in Desert Storm (ROE). The ROE were designed to reduce the possibility of fratricide.
- 151 Gregory M. Swider, *The Navy's Experience With Joint Air Operations: Lessons Learned From Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm* (Alexandria, Va: Center for Naval Analyses, 1993), 36-37.
- 152 Keaney and Cohen, 273.
- 153 Ibid., 40.
- 154 Eliot Cohen, "The Mystique of U.S. Air Power," *Foreign Affairs* Vol 73, No 1 (Jan/Feb 1994): 111.
- 155 Keaney and Cohen, 214.
- 156 Air Force Doctrine Document 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine*, Draft 21 May 1996.
- 157 John A. Tirpak, "Future Engagement," *Air Force Magazine*, January 1997, 19.

Chapter 4

The Implications of Casualty Sensitivity for the USAF

What's the point of having this superb military that you're always talking about if we can't use it?

Madeleine K. Albright
United States Representative to the United Nations
January 1997

Introduction

The bulk of the research provided in this study indicates that there is very little new about America's casualty sensitivity. Eric Larson's study not only lays out time-honored criteria used by the public to gauge support for military operations, but also puts to rest the notion that a new threshold for casualty sensitivity has emerged.¹⁵⁸ Additionally, a review of America's involvement in limited war since 1945 suggests that casualty sensitivity among political and military leaders has significantly shaped this country's conduct in such wars, particularly the employment of air power. Experience and perspective gained from these and other conflicts are distilled into doctrine, and reflect institutional beliefs regarding the nature and conduct of war. Therefore, it is not surprising that casualty sensitivity is addressed in current military doctrine. Even the propensity of air power advocates to sell air power on the basis of casualty minimization relative to other forms of military force is not new. So why has this issue received so much recent attention in professional military and foreign policy publications?

A combination of factors have piqued interest in this subject. The strategic environment has changed; compelling threats to our vital national interests have diminished, while peripheral concerns have increased. The Clinton Administration's recent decisions

to employ military forces in peripheral conflicts despite weak political and public support has given a disproportionate weight to the significance of casualty avoidance. At the same time, the remarkable U.S. military performance in the Gulf War has created the impression that with new technologies, air power can deliver military results while keeping casualties extremely low. Pressure for low casualties from some members of Congress and the public is being replaced by an expectation of no-casualty warfare.¹⁵⁹

In many ways the Air Force has contributed to perpetuating this expectation. Advocates of the bloodless use of force often refer to a “public demand for low casualty warfare” to support acquisitions and defend roles and missions. While exploiting perceived public sensitivity to casualties is not a new strategy for the Air Force, the extent to which references to this issue have permeated official language and acquisition rhetoric is unparalleled. Unfortunately, the short term success of this “oversell” tactic may create a number of problems for the Air Force in the future.

An Era “Free Of Compelling Threats”

The end of the Cold War brought what political scientist John Mueller calls an era of “less than compelling threats” to the United States. Mueller observes that “in this new world dominated by unthreatened wealth seekers, public opinion will play its role in U.S. foreign policy, and as always it will be an important one.”¹⁶⁰ In terms of military intervention, Mueller’s analysis of public opinion data continues to indicate that “the notion that Americans should die to police a small, distant, perennially troubled, and unthreatening place has always proved difficult to sell. Nor has it been possible to generate much support for the notion that American lives should be put at risk in order to encourage democracy abroad.”¹⁶¹ In other words, when the threats are not compelling, the perceived benefits of the intervention will be low and support for military intervention will be difficult to build and maintain. This aspect of U.S. public opinion naturally conflicts with a national security strategy like *Engagement and Enlargement*.¹⁶² Without strong leadership and a likelihood of success, the U.S. public will resist military engagement in situations deemed peripheral to U.S. interests.

Generating public support for intervention is further complicated by the fact that national leaders and the public often disagree on which threats are vital and warrant military intervention. A 1994 public opinion study conducted by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations notes that only 39 percent of those surveyed favored the use of U.S. military in defending South Korea against an invasion from the North. This stands in sharp contrast to the 82 percent approval expressed by surveyed Congressional leaders on the same issue.¹⁶³ The survey also indicated a sharp divide between the public and politicians when it came to using the military to defend any ally under attack. When compared to data collected in 1990, this study indicates a trend of “increasing public reluctance to use military force” even in areas of long standing U.S. involvement.¹⁶⁴ The lack of compelling threats and little consensus between the public and their elected representatives fosters an environment where support for military operations involving casualties may be quite fragile. Larson warns that without moral force or a broadly recognized national interest, “even a small number of casualties may often be sufficient to erode public support for the intervention.”¹⁶⁵ Unfortunately, the strong leadership required to secure consensus in this environment has not been demonstrated since the Gulf War. Yet the Gulf War was not a good test of America’s ability to support a costly war effort because of its brevity and the paucity of U.S. casualties.¹⁶⁶ Indeed, John Mueller’s analysis of polling data suggests that support for that war too, would have declined as a function of increasing casualties.¹⁶⁷

The current strategic environment places policymakers in a difficult position: committing the military without public support is politically unwise, but basing foreign policy on opinion polls denudes the nation of its useable military power. Recent debates in Congress indicate that U.S. policy makers are attempting to fix this problem by committing the military only with the assurance that casualties can be held to an acceptably low number. This “fix” is reflected in a recent publication enumerating the Clinton administration’s principles for military action.¹⁶⁸ Dr. Charles Stevenson, a professor at the National War College, lists the Clinton Administration’s first principle for the use of force as: “When vital interests are at stake, the nation should use whatever force may be necessary to achieve a quick, decisive victory with low U.S. casualties.”¹⁶⁹ According to

Stevenson, the implication that U.S. casualties must remain low even when vital interests are at stake is “accepted as gospel within the Washington beltway.” This observation-- that casualty minimization applies even when vital interests are at stake-- helps explain Washington’s fixation with casualty avoidance when contemplating interventions involving less compelling interests.¹⁷⁰

However, by focusing on the casualties, policy makers underestimate the potential resilience of public opinion in peripheral conflicts. Even with no vital interests at stake, the U.S. public continues to conduct “a reasonable cost-benefit analysis.” As an example, the loss of 18 soldiers in Somalia resulted in public pressure to reverse policy because the perceived benefits of the operation paled in comparison to the actual costs. On the other hand, the loss of 19 U.S. airmen in the 25 June 1996 terrorist attack on the American compound in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, resulted in no such pressure. Neither the deployments to Saudi Arabia, to support on-going operations in Iraq, nor the peacekeeping operations in Somalia represented vital national interests. Still the American public recognizes and accepts the potential costs and benefits of a continued U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia. Interestingly, despite the lack of public outcry, Congress was quick to call for investigations into the Dhahran bombing. During the subsequent hearings, Democratic Senator Sam Nunn reminded his colleagues that military life is not risk free and warned them against establishing “an expectation of zero-casualties.”¹⁷¹ This incident supports my argument that the roots of America’s casualty sensitivity lie within Congress itself.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General John Shalikashvili has recently speculated that there is now a “Somalia syndrome” shaping the employment of the U.S. armed forces in operations other than war (MOOTW) as a result of “the bitter lessons of Somalia.”¹⁷² Shalikashvili observes that it is extremely difficult for peacekeepers to suffer any casualties without jeopardizing public support for the operation.¹⁷³ This underscores the perception that low casualties are a requirement for any future use of force especially in military operations other than war (MOOTW).¹⁷⁴ This perception was reinforced by members of the Senate Armed Services Committee who insisted that casualties be minimized during the U.S. interventions in Haiti and Bosnia. The number of casualties deemed acceptable by many in Congress and the public for these deployments was

distressingly close to zero.¹⁷⁵ America's success at keeping casualties low in Haiti and Bosnia has left unchallenged the conventional wisdom regarding U.S. casualties — that America simply will not tolerate casualties where vital interests are not at stake.

However compelling this “conventional wisdom” may seem, there is ample evidence available which casts doubt on it. Dr. Richard K. Betts, a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, dismisses the common perceptions regarding casualties. According to Betts, public support is not contingent on casualties per se, “but casualties in an inconclusive war, casualties that the public sees as being suffered indefinitely, for no clear, good, or achievable purpose.”¹⁷⁶ Betts notes that the numbers of “US casualties in Grenada in 1983 and in Somalia a decade later were identical, but the first operation was quick, successful, and popular, while the second was none of these.”¹⁷⁷ Although Grenada was certainly not a compelling interest of the U.S., the need to rescue American medical school students on the island was presented as the justification for it. When American lives are at stake traditional constraints on military intervention are often mitigated. American decision makers have traditionally received strong support for decisive U.S. action aimed at preserving the safety of U.S. forces or other Americans abroad.¹⁷⁸ Despite the costs of the operation, presidential approval ratings rose after the 1975 *Mayaguez* rescue operation. The failed April 1980 attempt to rescue American hostages in Iran, *Operation Eagle Claw*, also elicited public approval. Dr. Mueller's work suggests that public support for operations to save American lives is attributable to the fact that the public “vastly overvalues the lives of Americans.”¹⁷⁹

The conventional wisdom concerning America's ability to tolerate casualties is attractive because it contains elements of truth. However, Dr. Larson's study indicates that casualties only become a significant factor in conflicts involving less vital interests, when success for the operation appears unlikely, actual costs exceed expectations, or political consensus breaks down.¹⁸⁰ America's recent experiences in MOOTW and limited war support Larson's assertions. While the conventional wisdom contains some partial-truths, the notion that casualties are a critical factor even when vital interests are concerned has no historical basis. More importantly, these misconceptions deflect attention from more significant issues involved in crafting coherent and supportable foreign policy.

Technological Solutions

In *The American Way of War*, Dr. Russell F. Weigley explains why America's yearning for quick, decisive, low casualty wars has been unattainable. Weigley concludes that because of a poor record of "obtaining acceptable decisions at tolerable costs" in limited war, the history of "useable" combat in the nuclear era may be reaching its end. This sentiment is supported by Dr. Betts's assertion that when no clear vital interest is a stake, "an adversary that poses even a moderate cost as the price for involvement may very well deter us."¹⁸¹ Thankfully, the events of the Gulf War may weaken the validity of this conclusion.

The Gulf War convinced many policy makers that the potential for "tolerable costs" in modern conflict may now be realizable.¹⁸² The marriage of stealth, precision guided munitions, and information technologies to a doctrine of "overwhelming force" proved extremely effective in securing military objectives with relatively few casualties. Yet, in the years since the Gulf War, strategists have come to view troop deployments as a political and strategic risk. The "overwhelming force" doctrine is giving way to a requirement for much smaller deployments to minimize the exposure of U.S. forces to hostilities. The "minimum footprint" concept risks fewer casualties and reduces the potential for undesired escalation.¹⁸³ The dilemma for the strategist has become that of massing sufficient firepower to achieve decisive military results while minimizing the exposure of U.S. military personnel.

Air power proponents appear eager to solve this dilemma,¹⁸⁴ and policy makers appear ready to accept their solution. Former Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee and Secretary of Defense Les Aspin believed that air power holds the key to the use of limited force in the post-cold war world. Mr. Aspin contended that the pragmatic application of force and the coercive threat of force will best serve U.S. policy goals in the post-cold war environment. According to Aspin, the American military technical revolution and advanced aerospace technologies have created new options with which to deal with rogue actors. Aspin argued that in the post-cold war environment the U.S. could choose limited interventions without the fear of escalation and use force "surgically with little risk."¹⁸⁵

With the Quadrennial Defense Review now in view and more budget cuts on the horizon, each of the services continues to stress its capability to solve the casualty dilemma in ways that strengthen its budget claims.¹⁸⁶ The Air Force is attempting to secure support for its future roles and missions, and for subsequent acquisitions by playing on Congressional concern over perceived public sensitivity to casualties. Air Force leaders and contractors frequently tout weapon systems advantages in terms of reducing casualties and subsequently securing public support for future military operations.

In an article entitled “What We Should Have Learned in Desert Storm But Didn’t,” retired General Charles A. Horner articulates the accepted wisdom among many Air Force leaders. Referring to the Gulf War, Horner states:

No President or general can overestimate the speed at which [public] patience will disappear if they are perceived to be spending lives foolishly. Public sensitivity to casualties can dominate our political and military decision-making in a crisis. Without a doubt, rising sensitivity to casualties increases the attractiveness of air power. [The] use of air power exposes fewer lives to enemy fire than does the employment of ground forces. Still, we can do much better. Long-range air power leaves fewer aircrew and support personnel within enemy reach. Stealth technology drastically reduces the chances of our aircraft being shot down.¹⁸⁷

Horner goes on to support the acquisition of the B-2 chiefly because of the bomber’s utility and survivability in the current strategic environment. Horner links the B-2s ability to reduce casualties to the aircraft’s range, stand-off firepower and stealth, all of which minimize the exposure of USAF personnel.¹⁸⁸

The proponents of theater ballistic missile defense (TMD) systems advocate acquisitions of missile defenses systems using similar logic. Joint Publication 3-01.5, *Doctrine for Joint Theater Missile Defense*, emphasizes the fact that troop concentrations are a friendly center of gravity because of the potential strategic impact of a missile attack resulting in massive casualties. The publication contends that apart from their military significance, attacks on concentrations of U.S. and multinational forces have political significance because of the propaganda value of showing the vulnerability of these forces to attack.¹⁸⁹ In describing the objectives of joint theater missile defense (TMD), the protection of deployed forces is given the same emphasis as the protection of “critical assets and areas of vital interest.” This document implies that killing Americans and coalition

forces could provide sufficient propaganda value to have strategic significance. Indeed, our concern over casualties has elevated what would have been a tactical event in earlier wars to strategic importance. Additional TMD literature supports this assessment. In an article entitled “More Than Military, Theater Missile Defenses Have A Major Role Well Beyond The Battlefield,” Colonel Jeff Roncka asserts that TMD serves strategic national interests by “helping secure domestic political support for foreign intervention.” According to Roncka, “recent history suggests that avoiding casualties is critical to preserving political support for US involvement abroad. Theater missile defense systems can help shift the balance in favor of engagements by preventing casualties.”¹⁹⁰

Information warriors also push high-tech alternatives to traditional “costly” warfare by playing to America’s perceived intolerance to casualties. Colonel Owen Jensen, writing in *Air Power Journal*, builds a case for information warfare by touting its precise and clean nature. Jensen further claims that “reduced casualties and reduced collateral damage, both ours as well as the enemy’s, are absolute requirements of tomorrow’s wars.”¹⁹¹

Not surprisingly, prominent DOD contractors have also adopted this tactic. Lockheed-Martin conducted a study in 1993 that concluded that “future US administrations would look increasingly unfavorably on using manned assets to achieve military objectives.” According to the study, Tomahawk cruise missiles offer only a partial solution to the need to strike targets without risk of pilot loss or capture.”¹⁹² As a result, Lockheed-Martin is pursuing Unmanned Tactical Aircraft (UTA) to fill a niche between cruise missiles and manned fighters. Lockheed’s goal is to sell the concept based on “emerging US national policy concerns” and limitations of manned aircraft. Lockheed spokesman David Chaput is convinced the UTA will end up in the US inventory because “we continue to get involved in wars in which loss of life is not an acceptable alternative.”¹⁹³ The family of uninhabited aerial vehicles (UAVs) promoted by the Defense Airborne Reconnaissance Office is another example of a technology sold on, among other things, its ability “to cut war risks.”¹⁹⁴ Upon reflection, this is a rather weak selling point since the U.S. has not lost a high altitude reconnaissance aircraft to enemy fire in thirty-five years. Apparently, the goal of “cutting war risks” is so attractive in today’s politically charged envi-

ronment that the question of “what practical risks are we cutting?” is not rigorously pursued. Similarly, references made to the public’s sensitivity to casualties usually fail to acknowledge the factors that shape it.

Buying Into The Concept of Low Risk Warfare

In the recently published document *Global Engagement*, Air Force Chief of Staff General Ronald Fogleman contends that the future Air Force will become the “strategic instrument of choice” for U.S. leaders because of its ability to make war — or to influence peace — decisively, while putting as few Americans in harm’s way as possible. Based on General Fogleman’s comments and the direction of on-going acquisition programs, the USAF seems deeply vested in providing low risk-military options for our foreign policy makers. This position is supported by a plethora of service publications claiming that air power must (and will) deliver victory with few casualties in future conflicts, thus securing public support. However, there are risks associated with publicizing this position that may outweigh the short term benefits of playing the casualty sensitivity card.

Touting our concern for casualties presents our adversaries with an obvious and potentially effective asymmetric strategy. Instead of meeting the massive military power of the United States head on, weaker nations may choose to adopt unconventional tactics. In these types of conflicts, air operations have not proven to provide quick, decisive, or low cost results. Mark Clodfelter noted, while writing about operations in Vietnam, that “Until air commanders and civilian officials alike realize that air power is unlikely to provide either ‘cheapness’ or victory in a guerrilla war — and that success in such a conflict may well equate to stalemate — the prospect of an Aerial Verdun will endure.”¹⁹⁵ Similarly, potential adversaries, aware that they can not match U.S. air power in tactical engagements, may seek only to inflict unacceptable casualties on Air Force assets and personnel where ever they are deployed. This type of strategy attacks a strategic vulnerability that is made more attractive every time we reaffirm our sensitivity to casualties through actions or words.

After the stunning success of the Gulf War, many Air Force personnel believe that “the low casualties experienced in Desert Storm established a norm that the U.S. military will have to meet in future wars.”¹⁹⁶ This perception is being adopted by policy makers and, through their influence, the public as well. Unfortunately, by using Desert Storm as the benchmark, we may be nurturing a national psychological dependence on low casualty, lightning victory.¹⁹⁷ Continued claims of low risk air warfare could result in undermining public support for future operations when, having expended our high-tech air power option, victory remains elusive and costs begin to mount.¹⁹⁸

Furthermore, any claim that military power can be wielded effectively and consistently without loss of life denies the true nature of war. While recent operations in Bosnia, Haiti, and the September 1996 CALCM and Tomahawk missile strikes in Iraq are examples of successful, and for the U.S. nearly bloodless, military interventions, the goals of these actions were extremely limited and reflected the highly political nature of the force employment. In each case the political imperative to avoid military casualties was placed well above concerns for operational effectiveness.¹⁹⁹ The blanket expectations created by these types of operations motivated General John Shalikashvili, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Staff, to warn members of Congress about setting “a standard that can not be retained in war.” In September 21, 1995 testimony before the Senate Armed Service Committee, Shalikashvili reminded Committee members that neither the military nor the public should be led to believe that military operations are routinely casualty-free.²⁰⁰ When the focus of military operations is force preservation, military effectiveness is sacrificed and operational timidity is bred.

The General’s remarks were undoubtedly influenced by the national fervor that was created by the downing and rescue of American F-16 pilot Scott O’Grady in Bosnia. The O’Grady incident highlighted Shalikashvili’s concern that Congress and the public may have unrealistic expectations for the employment of military power. On 2 June 1995, an American F-16 conducting “Deny Flight” operations over Bosnia was shot down by a Bosnian Serbs SA-6 missile.²⁰¹ The purpose of Deny Flight was to reduce the level of violence in Bosnia by stopping the flight of fixed-wing Serb aircraft over the country. During a routine combat air patrol (CAP) mission, Captain Scott O’Grady’s F-16 was

struck by an SA-6 surface-to-air missile. Captain O'Grady successfully ejected from his crippled aircraft, and was rescued six days later. However, as a result of the shoot down, CAPs were pulled out of Bosnia and restricted to flights over the Adriatic for nearly two months.²⁰² From their new orbits, the U.S. F-16s could not stop the Serbs from conducting short attack sorties. When questioned about the dubious utility of these operations, U.S. Air Force commanders routinely reminded their pilots that "there is nothing worth dying for in Bosnia."²⁰³

In a 29 July 1996 Senate hearing, Senator Sam Nunn made a penetrating observation, referring to Congressional concern about military casualties that applies to air strategists as well. Senator Nunn told his colleagues that "I hope we don't come out of here with the mentality that the only thing that a commander does in the field, protecting our national interests is to protect the force. Because if that is the whole mission than we will have a bunker mentality and the largest superpower in the world will find itself immobilized."²⁰⁴

Finally, if the Air Force does become the "strategic instrument of choice" for the future, our strategic national interests may become slaved to Air Force capabilities. Policymakers may be hesitant to use the forces available for fear of not having the capability to respond to a more pressing commitment elsewhere. Conversely, if the Air Force does provide irresistible leverage at minimal cost, it will be useful everywhere.²⁰⁵ This introduces the unattractive possibility that, given the forecasted strategic environment, air power could be used as an acceptable political tool in order to be "doing something" when the nation lacks the resolve to do anything else. By grooming the service to fill this role, the USAF may be contributing to the misuse of air power as a strategic political tool. By selling air power as an option to employ military power without concern for casualties, the USAF may encourage intervention in insupportable conflicts if casualties are incurred.

Notes

¹⁵⁸. Eric Larson, *Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations* (Santa Monica Ca: RAND, 1996), iv.

¹⁵⁹. Jacob Weisburg, "Zero Tolerance," *New Yorker*, 10 October 1994, 21 and John Mueller, "The Common Sense," *The National Interest*, Spring 1997, 83. According to Mueller "When Americans asked themselves how many lives peace in Somalia was worth the answer was rather close to zero," 83.

¹⁶⁰. John Mueller "The Common Sense," *The National Interest*, (Spring 1997): 81.

Notes

- ¹⁶¹. Ibid., 82.
- ¹⁶². *The National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* focuses on three central goals: to enhance security with effective military representation abroad, to bolster America's economic revitalization, and to promote democracy abroad. (NSS, i).
- ¹⁶³. John E. Rielly, *American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy 1995* (Chicago: The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 1995), 35. This disparity in consensus coupled with casualty projections in the tens of thousands for the conflict indicate a dramatic need for public education or a policy re-evaluation.
- ¹⁶⁴. Ibid., 37.
- ¹⁶⁵. Larson, 100.
- ¹⁶⁶. Mark J. Conversino, "Sawdust Superpower: Perceptions of US Casualty in the Post-Gulf War Era," *Strategic Review* XXV, no. 1 (January 1997): 9.
- ¹⁶⁷. John Mueller, *Policy and Public Opinion in the Gulf War* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 77.
- ¹⁶⁸. Charles A. Stevenson, "The Evolving Clinton Doctrine on the Use of Force," *Armed Forces & Society* Vol 22, No. 4 (Summer 1996): 511. Professor Stevenson concedes that none of these principles have been conclusively settled, however they do reflect a broad consensus among key administration figures.
- ¹⁶⁹. Ibid., 511.
- ¹⁷⁰. According to Stevenson it is a commonly accepted belief among Clinton administration policy makers that casualty minimization applies even when vital interests are at stake. This belief flies in the face of historical evidence. America has displayed an impressive ability to tolerate casualties when vital interest were at stake. America suffered the loss of 365,511 Union soldiers while fighting to hold the union together in the civil war. Similarly, the attack on Pearl Harbor so threatened American interests that the nation stoically supported the war effort despite the loss of 405,399 troops. [Casualty figures cited in: Harvey M. Sapolsky and Sharon K. Weiner, "War Without Casualties," *Across the Board*, October 1994, 42.]
- ¹⁷¹. Rick Maze, "Nunn: 'Zero-casualty' military is not possible," *Army Times*, 29 July 1996, 36.
- ¹⁷². Stevenson, 526.
- ¹⁷³. In an article published in *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 1995, Chester A. Croker, Former Assistant Secretary of State for Africa commented about the Somalia operation. According to Croker, Somalia was a failure because humanitarian intervention and muscular peacekeeping were not applied steadily and wisely. Croker notes that the failure in Somalia was caused by "strategic confusion followed by a collapse of political will when the confusion led to combat casualties." In light of these remarks, Shalikashvili's comments place too much emphasis on casualties and not enough on political vision and the construction of coherent intervention policy.
- ¹⁷⁴. Stevenson, 526.
- ¹⁷⁵. Weisburg 21, and Mueller, "The Common Sense," 83.
- ¹⁷⁶. Richard K. Betts, "What Will It Take To Deter the United States?" *Parameters*, Winter 1995-96, 76.
- ¹⁷⁷. Betts, 76. Dr. Betts does not define his meaning of success with respect to these operations. Both operations could be arguably be labeled as successes or failures depending on the criteria used.
- ¹⁷⁸. Stephen T. Hosmer, *Constraints on U.S. Military operations in Past Third World Conflicts* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1981): 109.
- ¹⁷⁹. John Mueller, "Fifteen Propositions About American Foreign Policy and Public Opinion In An Era Free Of Compelling Threats." Paper presented to the National Convention of the International Studies Association San Diego, CA. 31 March 1996, 7.
- ¹⁸⁰. Larson, 10-11.
- ¹⁸¹. Betts, 70. Betts goes on to explain that policymakers do not always decide to intervene based on careful cost-benefit analysis. When national honor or domestic political sensitivity become engaged the "imperative to demonstrate that we can not be coerced" may dominate decision making.
- ¹⁸². Douglas V. Johnson II, "The Gulf War: Lessons for the Future," *U.S. Domestic and National Security Agendas*, 2.
- ¹⁸³. Stevenson, 531.

Notes

¹⁸⁴. In *Ten Propositions Regarding Air Power*, Col Phillip S. Meilinger, former Dean of the School of Advanced Airpower Studies, states that PGMs and stealth aircraft have redefined the meaning of mass. Meilinger contends that with the accuracy of PGMs and the survivability inherent in stealth “objectives can be threatened, and if necessary attacked, with little collateral damage or civilian casualties, at low risk since few aircraft will be required.” Although Meilinger was referring to mass as applied in air war, many air force members have stretched this logic to compare the requirements for massed effects in air power with those of ground forces.

¹⁸⁵. Frank Hoffman, “Decisive Force: A New American Way of War?” *Strategic Review*, Winter 1995, 24.

¹⁸⁶. Stevenson, 531.

¹⁸⁷. Charles A. Horner, “What We Should Have Learned in Desert Storm But Didn’t,” *Air Force Magazine*, December 1996, 55.

¹⁸⁸. Horner’s “minimum exposure” rationale for the B-2 sounds much like the first Secretary of the Air Force, Stuart W. Symington’s, rationale for the B-36.

¹⁸⁹. Joint Publication 3-01.5, *Doctrine for Joint Theater Missile Defense*, 22 February 1996, I-5.

¹⁹⁰. Jeff Roncka, “More Than Military: Theater Missile Defenses Have A Major Role Well Beyond The Battlefield,” *Armed Forces Journal International*, November 1996, 30-31.

¹⁹¹. Owen E. Jensen, “Information Warfare Principles of Third-Wave War,” *Air Power Journal*, Winter 1994, 43.

¹⁹². Nick Cook, “Leaving the Pilot on the Ground,” *Jane’s Defense Weekly*, 3 July 1996: 34.

¹⁹³. Cook, 35.

¹⁹⁴. Editorial, “Time to Cut War Risks With UAVs,” *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, 12 June 1995: 224.

¹⁹⁵. Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 210.

¹⁹⁶. Thomas A. Keaney and Eliot A. Cohen, *Revolution in Warfare? Air Power in the Persian Gulf* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 214.

¹⁹⁷. James R. Fitzsimonds, “The Coming Military Revolution: Opportunities and Risks,” *Parameters*, Summer 1995, 34.

¹⁹⁸. Dr. Larson notes that one factor in gaining and maintaining support for military action is the public’s comparison of “prospective and actual costs.” By setting the an expectation of costs unrealistically low the USAF may be contributing to the weakening of public support.

¹⁹⁹. Much more aggressive and militarily appropriate courses of action were abandon when the National Command Authority made “no loss of life or possibility of capture” the primary constraints for the retaliatory attack on Iraq in September 1996. Desert Strike briefing, School of Advanced Airpower Studies, 30 January 1997, Maj. Gary Cox, HQ 8th AF.

²⁰⁰. John Shalikashvili, Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing. Transcript by: Federal News Service, September 21, 1995.

²⁰¹. Ken Cauthern, “Return With Honor: The 31st Fighter Wing Over Bosnia,” *National Review*, 10 July 1996, 18.

²⁰². After months of political wrangling with the U.N. the CAPs returned to flying over Bosnia; however the F-16s CAPs were augmented with aircraft capable of suppressing enemy air defenses when flying over areas of known surface-to-air missile activity. Interview with Major Scott G. Walker, F-16 flight lead in Operation Deny Flight, 18 May 1997.

²⁰³. Interview with Major Scott G. Walker, F-16 flight lead in Operation Deny Flight, 18 May 1997.

²⁰⁴. Rick Maze, “Nunn: ‘Zero Casualty’ Military is not Possible.” *Army Times*, 29 July 1996, 36.

²⁰⁵. Fitzsimonds, 35.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

We gave casualty avoidance priority over military effectiveness because it was the morally correct thing to do.

General Charles A. Horner
Desert Storm JFACC

The purpose of this study has been to examine the influence of America's casualty sensitivity on military doctrine and strategy, and in particular on air strategy. This study challenges the doctrinal assumption that the military must place more emphasis on force preservation because the "American public will not tolerate U.S. military casualties."²⁰⁶ In order to accomplish this objective, this research paper accomplished three tasks. First, this study examined the true nature of America's casualty sensitivity. Then the study explored the influence of America's sensitivity on military strategy in the Korean, Vietnam and Gulf wars. Finally, the study focused on the factors in the current strategic environment that have brought attention to this issue as well as the implications of these factors for the USAF. This final chapter highlights the conclusions of this study and provides recommendations for military strategists and leaders.

The Nature of America's Casualty Sensitivity

It is commonly accepted that the source of America's casualty sensitivity is the U.S. public. However, America's casualty sensitivity is actually the combined sensitivities of the U.S. public, military leaders and policy makers. Although their interests overlap, each group has distinct motivations to keep military casualties down. While some

political scientists have suggested that the American public's threshold for casualties tolerance has changed,²⁰⁷ my research indicates otherwise.

The American public places significant value on the lives of U.S. citizens, including American servicemen.²⁰⁸ However, this study does not support the conventional wisdom that the U.S. public will no longer accept casualties in military operations. Instead, the public's support for military intervention reflects fairly consistent and rational balancing of the costs and benefits associated each military operations.²⁰⁹ More than just casualties, the public weighs the interests at stake against the perceived cost of the operation and the likelihood of its success. Additionally, public support for military interventions can be shaped by the leadership of and consensus among America's foreign policy decision makers. However, public support is rarely static and can vacillate over time in a conflict as a function of actual costs, progress, and changing objectives.

This study indicates that the most critical element of America's casualty sensitivity is the U.S. policy maker. While there is little evidence to support the position that the U.S. public is becoming more sensitive to military casualties, there is ample evidence which points to an increased political sensitivity to military casualties. This sensitivity is becoming more acute as policy makers attempt to execute a National Security Strategy that advocates international intervention in a strategic environment that lacks compelling threats.

Responding to political pressures, the military has placed increased emphasis on force preservation in doctrine and strategy. However, current doctrinal emphasis on force preservation is based on the fallacious assumption that the U.S. public will demand low casualty warfare in future conflicts regardless of context. This assumption has been used to shape strategy development and buttress arguments for future acquisitions. While force preservation has always been an element of U.S. military strategy it is now becoming a dominant factor, on par with the accomplishment of military objectives.²¹⁰

In order to appreciate the influence of casualty sensitivity today, it is necessary to investigate the past. Air power's earliest theorists appealed to America's war-weary population by emphasizing the potential for air power to deliver swift victory in war with fewer casualties than surface forces. My research indicates that America's sensitivity to

casualties has had a significant impact of the formulation of military strategy, particularly air strategy in limited wars.

Casualty Sensitivity and Air Strategy in Limited War

America's experiences in Korea and Vietnam are remarkably similar. Both conflicts were limited wars, fought for negotiated settlements within the geopolitical environment of the Cold War. Additionally, both conflicts were justified in terms of insuring national security against the encroachment of communism, and initially both garnered solid public support. Similarly, as the prospects for swift victory vanished, political objectives changed, consensus eroded, and casualties mounted, public support for both wars declined. As public support deteriorated in Korea and Vietnam, America's leaders turned to air power as a means to influence negotiations while reducing the exposure of U.S. ground forces. Air strategy evolved to meet the greater strategic objectives of terminating the conflicts favorably and shoring up public support for the wars by reducing U.S. military casualties. Despite the high costs and inconclusive nature of these conflicts, policy makers did not give up the hope that air power would yet live up to its promise of swift, low cost victory in war.

Desert Storm stands out as the anomaly in America's experiences in limited war. Military strategists enjoyed clear objectives, steady political consensus, and high levels of popular support as they planned and conducted Operation Desert Storm. In contrast to Korea and Vietnam, political and military leaders emphasized building and maintaining public support for the conflict from the outset of planning. However, generating support for the conflict was eased by the fact that Americans generally recognized the significance of the interests at stake in the Gulf and were willing to make commensurate sacrifices.²¹¹ Nevertheless, military strategists had no intentions of testing America's resolve. Due to the good fortune of encountering a demoralized and strategically bankrupt Iraqi military, strategists could routinely sacrifice operational effectiveness for force preservation. This was clearly the case in air operations where, unless it involved supporting troops in contact with the enemy or rescuing a downed airman, air planners proceeded under the assumption that no target was worth an airplane.²¹² The stunning military suc-

cess of Desert Storm and its remarkably low casualties convinced many policy makers that advancements in aerospace technology had finally provided them with a low risk military intervention option. Air power advocates were quick to embrace this notion and articulate the vision of the USAF becoming the strategic instrument of choice in future military interventions.

The Strategic Environment and Casualty Sensitivity

The post-Cold War strategic environment the United States faces few immediate threats to national security. However, the price of great power status is an increased pressure to engage in and shape world events. Policy makers have correctly assessed the difficulty of generating public support in this environment for peripheral conflicts, especially those that are likely to be long, inconclusive, and costly. In an effort to create more flexibility in military interventions that do not have strong support, policy makers are seeking low-risk military options. While successful in Haiti and Bosnia, the consequences of focusing on casualty reduction and side-stepping the more critical elements of forming foreign policy are evident in America's experiences in Somalia. What policy makers and strategists apparently fail to recognize is that even in an era of less-than-compelling threats, American support for military intervention can still be established and maintained. Public support in peripheral conflicts requires strong political leadership, consensus, and the clear articulation of the significant interests involved. By focusing narrowly on casualty minimization without meeting these requirements, policy makers should be prepared to respond to the public's demand for a reevaluation of policy if significant casualties are incurred in a peripheral conflict.

Recommendations

This study has examined the extent of the influence of casualty sensitivity on military strategy and doctrine and found that despite a flawed institutional understanding of the issue, we have not yet suffered significant operational consequences. However, this is due to the nature of recent conflicts, enemy capabilities and the vast superiority of

U.S. military forces. The following recommendations are offered to insure that we keep casualty sensitivity and force protection in the proper perspective.

First, the U.S. military should insure that references made to America's casualty sensitivity in doctrine and professional publications reflect a more complete understanding of the issue and are not exaggerated. Failure to do so may lead to unwarranted constraints on strategy development and breed operational timidity.

Second, in light of a more complete understanding of the casualty sensitivity issue the military should reevaluate its heavy emphasis on force preservation in recent doctrinal publications. My research supports General John Shalikashvili's concern that low casualties in recent conflicts, and a doctrinal shift toward force preservation, may make military leaders fearful of being second guessed for taking casualties and result in a hesitance to act that may endanger troops or the mission.²¹³ The current doctrinal trends and recent experiences in Bosnia and Haiti may make the juxtaposition in the priorities of force preservation and military objectives an unchallenged institutional belief.²¹⁴

Finally, while the USAF has a significant role in providing flexible force employment options for policy makers, we should be careful not to over emphasize the ability of air power to minimize losses. The contextual elements of future conflicts will determine air power's effectiveness and determine the costs of the conflict. By establishing unrealistic expectations for low casualties the USAF may be contributing to its own psychological defeat and to undermining public support in a costly future conflict.

In the final analysis, military doctrine and strategy should be focused on defeating America's enemies at reasonable cost, not simply on minimizing combat casualties. Doctrine and strategy that emphasizes force preservation over operational effectiveness may very well breed hesitancy and meekness that could result in lost opportunities and potentially greater casualties. My research indicates no problems so far, however, aphorisms like "no target is worth an airplane"²¹⁵ and "there is nothing out there worth dying for,"²¹⁶ point to potential problems if we simplistically institutionalize this type of rhetoric out of context.

Notes

²⁰⁶. Air Force Doctrine Document 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine*, Draft 21 May 1996. And Joint Vision 2010 (Washington D.C.: Government printing office ,1996).

Notes

²⁰⁷. See Edward Luttwak, "Toward Post-Heroic Warfare." and Charles Moskos, "When American's Accept Casualties."

²⁰⁸. John Mueller, "The Common Sense," *The National Interest*, Spring 1997, 83. Mueller contends that the American public vastly overvalues the lives of Americans.

4. Eric Larson, *Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operation* (Santa Monica CA: RAND, 1984), iii.

²¹⁰. Ronald R. Fogleman, "What Air Power Can Do In Bosnia," *Wall Street Journal*, 11 October 1995.

²¹¹. Larson, 40. Mueller contends that supports would have diminished as a function of casualties. Yet considering the high levels of support for the war to being with, its brevity, and the emphasis already placed on casualty minimization, it is difficult to imagine the impact of declining support due to casualties on the conduct of military operations.

²¹²²². Thomas Keaney and Eliot Cohen. *Revolution in Warfare? Air Power in the Persian Gulf* (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 214.

²¹³. John Shalikashvili, Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing. Transcript by: Federal News Service, September 21, 1995.

²¹⁴. Robyn M. Dawes, *Rational Choices In An Uncertain World* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1988), 233.

²¹⁵. Keaney and Cohen, 214.

²¹⁶²⁶. Interview with Maj Scott Walker, F-16 flight lead Operation Deny Flight, 18 May 1997.

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